

Of HORROR and HOPE



Member reflections
on mental health

Flash fiction and poetry collated by the

HWA WELLNESS COMMITTEE

The Horror Writers Association Presents

OF HORROR AND HOPE

Poetry, flash fiction, and personal reflections

Collated by the HWA Wellness Committee



Horror Writers Association

2022

The Horror Writers Association Presents
OF HORROR AND HOPE
Poetry, flash fiction, and personal reflections

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for the HWA Wellness Committee

Cover design by Greg Chapman (<https://dark-designs.com/>)

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Special thanks to Sumiko Saulson and the HWA social media team



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Trigger Warning:
This work addresses mental health and may be upsetting for some readers.

FOREWORD

Dave Jeffery

“Words have no power to impress the mind without the exquisite horror of their reality.”
—Edgar Allen Poe

Nothing connects one person to another more than the shared experience. Be it good or bad, the unity it provides is a powerful and enduring source of human understanding. Such a nuance is important. It helps us connect with the world, makes us feel as though we exist in conjunction, that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Mental illness is the nemesis of inclusion. It severs our ties with reality, be that psychological or visceral, it also devalues us as people and its presence in our lives suffers societal responses that foster stigma and exclusion at a time when we need understanding and support. Globally, 10.7% of the population suffers with some form of mental health issue. It affects no one demographic more than another, has significant economic and social influence, and incurs major damage on the human condition. It is little surprise then that hope of better times is the first casualty in this war against mental illness, and its impact on the lives of so many.

There is strong evidence of synergy between creativity and mental wellbeing (Gillam, 2018). The recovery paradigm utilises creativity, especially the arts, as a vehicle for empowerment, and this platform of liberation as a means to instil hope. Through the interpretation and ultimate expression of personal experience, creatives are able to give form to the abstract nature of mental illness, and its influence on the individual.

Within its pages, *Of Horror & Hope* embraces this concept. It brings together unique interpretations of mental health, mental illness, and recovery. Through poetry, flash-fiction pieces, and vignettes of the lived experience, the creatives within these pages lay bare their brush with mental illness, give insight into how it has affected their lives, and ultimately what they have done to fight back. They have taken their innate gift of creativity as vanguard, they are bringing hope to despair for the ultimate prize, liberty for their mental wellbeing.

These emboldened souls are ready to show you how they beat the beast that is mental illness. Be brave, let us look together not in despair, but in wonder.

Dave Jeffery
April 2022

Reference

Gillam, T. (2018) ‘Creativity, Wellbeing, and Mental Health Practice’. *Palgrave studies in Creativity and Culture*. London: Palgrave MacMillan

SHIP OF FOOLS

Dave Jeffery

Thought: thick, turgid—
A world of treacle
Through which we wade
The walls, sometimes gossamer
More often: Perspex,
Yet we are ever within them,
Incarceration incarnates—
Pinel's prisoners, now fettered
Within the dungeon of Moral Treatment.

The crime? Defined—
by those who want nothing to do with us,
Yet decide our worth,
Using ignorance as both
Weapon and guide.

We are considered libertine,
So denied liberty,
Afraid this Ship of Fools should run aground,
Corrupting pseudo-reason
With pseudo-folly.

Once a hapless tar,
Jack set adrift,
Now the land-locked leper,
Throwing dark shapes
In dim doorways,
And plastic bags and garbage,
Become company and home,
Something for
The passers-by to by-pass,
Lest they question,
How all this began.

It is not action,
But reaction,
Honing the ignorance
Of so many, towards so few.
And there is a dawning sadness that:
Any parity, any semblance of unity
Bonding outcast to socialite,
Finds form in fear.

UGLY SWEATER POEM

Jessica Drake-Thomas

Depression is a heavy
wool sweater, drenched
by spring rain—clinging, clammy,
weighted, hot. A turtleneck
sweater, strangling me
with tightening, clutching
fingers. With long, droopy
sleeves that hang
like handcuffs. Feels like a hair
shirt—scratching til I
bleed, soaking up
my pain sacrifice. It's in
my skull, attempting to
shove out through bone
walls, migraine haze of
fireworks. Orange and
green, it oozes ugly,
devours what's left of me
with toothless mouth,
a hand-knit straitjacket,
wants me subdued, secret serial killer
goes until I'm red-wrecked: a pile
of cherries, stone hearts torn
out.

Jessica Drake-Thomas is a poet, fiction-writer, and PhD student. She's the author of *Burials*, a gothic horror poetry collection. She's a poetry editor at *Coffin Bell Journal*. She's interested in baneful herbs, funeral rites, and black labs.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

IN SPITE OF IT

Lucy A. Snyder

A friend asked me how
I can still create in the face
of our constant crushing dismay
at seeing women harassed, gaslit,
witchburnt, doxxed, cast aside?

And I replied that I still create
because if I stop...then what?
I will be miserable. The bullies
and creeps will keep being rotten.
Why *shouldn't* I stick to my keys?

I want you to write, my friend.
If you can't write for pleasure,
I want you to write for spite.

Spill the truth from your fevered head,
and to hell with all the gatekeepers
and all the naysayers who whisper
that your soul's joy is not enough.

And if you can't find that joy,
I want you to *attack the page*
as if it's been your cruel jailer
for 20 long, hard-labor years
and in the cell you just found
power and freedom in the form
of a nice, sharp, sturdy knife.

Lucy A. Snyder is the author of 15 books and 100+ published short stories. Her most recent titles are the collection *Exposed Nerves* and the forthcoming apocalyptic horror novel *Sister, Maiden, Monster*. She lives in Ohio with a jungle of houseplants, a clowder of cats, and an insomnia of housemates.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

POWERS OF FIRE

Mary Leoson

When students learn that two areas I haunt are positive psychology and horror fiction, their faces twist into confusion. They think: how can this optimistic instructor with a bright smile find such value in the dark? What I explain is that art helps me process the painful things in life; through writing I transform fear, loss, shame, regret, and uncertainty onto the page and into another dimension. Crafting a piece of fiction is a sacred ceremony during which I walk into shadow and look around. I peek under the bed and into closets, releasing demons from the deep corners and pulling in the light. For me, writing is a magical incantation. Without it, snakes would roam free, nestling their way into my mind, into my body, where they would lay eggs. And I know that would hatch.

Snakes have taught me about the powers of fire—transformation and transmutation. When I write, I weave my inner self out into the world through story, sharing all the things that might otherwise singe me from the inside out. On the page, they take on their own lives, speaking through character, whispering through setting, tickling readers with goosebumps and shivers. And at the same time, this release creates room for growth, insight, and hope. As I shed my skin, I grow wings.

Mary Leason is a Pushcart Nominee who specializes in literary horror fiction. Leason holds an MFA in Fiction, an MA in English, and an MS in Psychology. When she's not writing about ghosts, she teaches psychology and English at the college level. You can learn more at www.maryleason.com



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

JUST BEYOND MY REACH

Susan Schwartz

It is a dreary dark place inside my mind.
No lights or signs to show me the path.

Where shall I go from here?
Is there no way out of the prison where I have locked myself?

I hear a dripping faucet that only seems to echo on my nerves.
It urges me to do something about the darkness in which I live.

I dream of a day where the sun's rays warm my face,
And I experience ecstasy from the sensation.

But those are just memories, fleeting,
And I fear unattainable anymore.

Susan Schwartz: I have written horror/paranormal/medical stories for around 17 years ranging from freelance articles to editing manuscripts for other authors. I am a member of the Horror Writers Association, the Nonfiction Authors Association, and the Virginia Writers Club where I serve as 1st Vice-President of the state organization.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

PATIENTLY AWAITING THE DOOR

A.R. Clayton

I stand at the edge of the well,
a hole with no barrier, descending, descending below.
A purple light glows from its depth, washing my eyes.
I see a shape waving, inviting me in.
They are crouched on a ledge, watching me closely, their head resting against the dirt wall.
I wonder if they are waiting for me to feel the wind.

It's not too deep, I hear them promise as I try to find the bottom again.
I shift forward, my shoe skidding over gravel as I kneel.
The fog flows in around me, muting the light.
Dare I go in and follow?

I bounce my pencil eraser, watching the rivulets run down my windowpane.
What would happen if I stepped into this abyss?
This thing where I wake myself before the nightmare continues;
where I scatter my thoughts like fireflies before I see them too clearly.
It's like a symphony beckoning me to dance, to come forward and taste.
To seek what is hidden, to unlock another door.
Truths await.

I turn to the figure and watch as they lean forward, arms spread in anticipation.
The light plays on their fluttering hair, and they're gone.
I sit at the edge of the well, my heels kicking into the dirt.
A dog appears in the fog and lays beside me.
We wait, quietly defiant.

A metal arm shoots out from the well, cracking the air above our heads.
It falls, twisting and circling, forming balustrades and rails.
It sinks into the earthen and stone walls, finding recesses to fasten onto.
The metal groans as it coalesces, echoing within the well.
It is crying out against our treachery,
our stairwell.

I set my pencil down as we descend,
lantern in hand.
The dog leads the way.

A.R. Clayton is an American writer who independently published her first horror novel *Memory Bound*. Her second novel is currently being shopped around to agents. The author likes to tell stories with uncomfortable truths society would rather hide, tucked behind bolted doors and heavy curtains thick with dust.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

DESPITE IT ALL

Deborah LeBlanc

She learned to shrink when very young
Unnoticed meant safety—a good thing
For visibility's colors were black and blue
Colors she hated.

Years went by, but the colors didn't, so
She began writing horror to escape the colors
And it worked...for a while

As time went on, however, she soon
Discovered things more horrid than black and blue.

Having your soul chopped into pieces
Knowing an emptiness too profound
For words. Even words touted in horror.

Again, time passed as it will
And somehow through the colors and splintered soul
She learned to stand upright
To stand tall and do it all
Because that was really
What was meant to be
All along

Deborah LeBlanc: I served as President of HWA years ago, published 16 novels. I'm a certified clinical hypnotherapist, Therapeutic Imagery Practitioner a Master NLP Practitioner, and have specialty certifications in 48 other modalities.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

NIGHT TERRORS

L. E. Daniels

Shadows stretch late-afternoon-long to deep-solid-dark—
A mirror for your dread.

Often, themes repeat: fly from sleep, see your body, a gray rumple—
Oh-my-god-am-I-dead?
You strike the wall like a bird trapped and wake panting, bed empty.
You glance down the hall at children asleep.

Your husband, the night owl awake, calls out: *You're OK*. He's used to this.
You're not.

Maybe it's smoke—a rolling black canopy overhead; DayGlo orange wicks up walls.
Flying, you wake racing down the hall
Set to carry children from a smokeless house, two at once.
You hear again,

You're OK. He's used to this.
You're not.

Turn off the bedside lamp:
A pill knocks you down a hole saved for must-have nights,
But this medicated troll snaps at children over breakfast, and eventually, you fly anyway.
Pills journey into the cupboard, forgotten, until another must-have night.

You're OK, you tell yourself. *You're used to this*.
And you're not.

Bodies: a gnarl of women like *Guernica* forever and ever, arms thrown open exclamations—
Among them, you try to breathe, heart full, your walls grow thinner—
That's what makes you a good writer—
And in the kitchen, you hold onto the sink.

Your son taps you: *Mom, you're OK*. He's used to this.
You're not.

Sometimes, sometimes there's nothing—you never know when—
And sleep peels open like soft fruit. Rest takes you.
Dream snakes shy from your touch. Bodies stop asking to be seen and
You wake with the relief of birds at first light.

You're OK. *You're used to this*.
You're not. But you will be.

A New Englander living in Australia, **L. E. Daniels** won Rhode Island's Newport Poetry Contest in 1987, earned her MFA in Creative Writing with Emerson College, and her work includes *Serpent's Wake: A Tale for the Bitten*. An editor for over 100 titles, Lauren directs Brisbane Writers Workshop.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

PERSPECTIVE

TJ Kang

The old woman on the porch across the street is getting wet. I can see her through my window. I wonder why she doesn't go inside.

If I had a choice, I would stay in my house where I'm safe and dry and alone. I wouldn't go out and walk to the train station in the rain and sit on a train with people all around, looking at me like they know there's something not quite right. Or not looking at me, which is worse because maybe they already judged me and turned away. Or maybe they don't see me at all.

Mom says there's always a choice. Easy for her to say. She fits. She means well, but I don't think she knows what it's like to be the weird kid. I try to imagine her being afraid to get a job or start a college class, and I fail. I definitely can't picture her afraid to go outside.

The old woman leans into the falling rain. She holds out her hands to catch the raindrops. I think she's smiling. I wonder if something's wrong with her.

The alarm sounds on my phone. It's time to go. Now or never.

I zip my jacket slowly. I pull my hat down over my ears and throw my bag on my shoulder. Before I can change my mind, I open the door and go out. Rain hits my face instantly. I blink it away.

Across the street, the old woman calls, "Young man!" I don't correct her. I walk over, and she pats the wet seat next to her. I sit, and the wetness soaks through my jeans. She points up at the sky. "Look," she says. I look. There's a rainbow. It's beautiful.

I smile at her.

TJ Kang is a licensed mental health professional. She loves horror and writing scary stories because they help her cope with a scary world. She is the author of the novel *Guardian*, a ghost story about love, loss, and vengeance. She lives in San Diego, California with her husband and assorted pets.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

ABERRATION

Eugen Bacon

lockouts lockins jag jag tereu

pathless fragments

sifting spaces

absent puddles

falling words

echoes rumours

lost birdsong

missing rivers

shudders sighs

future nothing

past no thing

hotline strangers

named deb

HOPE IS THE BONE

Eugen Bacon

of a dead animal
music is the weather
backside up
a kiss is the sky
waiting a little longer
words in proxy
sentences in spook
zoom to the backdrop
of a country road
tap on the door
of a forbidden protocol
the gods will delete us
no mask no entry
jag jag tereu

Eugen Bacon is an African Australian author of several novels and collections. Her recent books *Ivory's Story*, *Danged Black Thing* and *Saving Shadows* are finalists in the BSFA Awards. Eugen was announced in the honor list of the 2022 Otherwise Fellowships for 'doing exciting work in gender and speculative fiction'.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Jason R Frei

I am a social worker and a writer of horror. I work with children and adolescents in a school setting. For many of these students, their nightmares and horrors are real life events that affect them on a day-to-day basis. They feel the cold dread of waking up to a new day, not knowing if it will be worse than the day before. They fear coming to school. Their antagonists are pop quizzes, bullies, raging hormones, the uncertainty of a global pandemic. To some of them, home is a four-letter word that defines horror.

In my office, they talk about these fears, these horror stories that do not live on pages in a book. We write their narratives down or speak them in the ages-old tradition of storytelling. Battles are fought with the demons of addiction, the monstrosities called parents, and the memories of things done wrong and never right.

By recounting their stories, no matter how dark or dismal, they learn to accept what has happened to them. They gain some perspective. The horrors wrought upon them do not make them who they are. There is a choice to be made—hero or villain. A choice to let the story dictate their lives, or a choice to let their lives finish the story however they see fit.

In these instances, I am nothing more than a reader and an editor. I listen to what has happened and I give feedback on how to shape the story to make it better. I instill hope, that one day, the story may be completed to their satisfaction and that other readers will gain some understanding from it—that the reader will connect with it. And when the story is over, they will laugh and cry and want for more to be told.

Jason R Frei lives in Eastern Pennsylvania where he works as a therapist with children and adolescents. He writes speculative fiction culled from the experiences of his life and those he works with. He blends science fiction, fantasy and horror into new creations. Visit him online: <https://facebook.com/odinstones>



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

CONTAINED

Teel James Glenn

Slitted eyes
And gritted teeth
Anger held just
Beneath
An angled life
Obtuse to truth
Just once I'd like to shout
And scream
Just once to vent
My poisoned spleen
Yet here I sit
Up straight
And quiet
Crow, it seems
Is my steady diet!

Teel James Glenn's poetry and short stories have been printed in over two hundred magazines including *Weird Tales*, *Mystery Weekly*, *Pulp Adventures*, *Space & Time*, *Cirsova*, *Silverblade*, and *Sherlock Holmes Mystery*. His novel *A Cowboy in Carpathia* won best novel 2021 in the Pulp Factory Award. His website is: TheUrbanSwashbuckler.com



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

TORN: A STORY OF OPPOSITE DISTRACTION

Jude S. Walko

His hand brushed across her sun-kissed hair,
burning her cheeks to rouge from fair.
She smiled, from within, letting his warmth encompass her.
as emotions, deep inside, began their best to stir.

The walls were grey. Her toes cold. The floors cracked.
Dog-eared books, syringes and stained pillows were stacked.
Were these memories, moments or thoughts of the past,
barely remembered and not meant to last?

But the sun pierced through her eyes, ever so blue,
reigniting her passion, as if it were new.
Nothing, it seemed, could depress the love deep down inside,
'cause now she was up on this particular tide.

But the lows came fast, and they were deep, dark and sullen.
Sometimes she forgot just how far she had fallen.
Usually at night, did these specters arrive.
She often wondered how she'd remained alive.

But the dawn of the new day was moments away,
If only she could maintain and on the course stay.
"Love conquers All!", or so it'd been said,
but first she had to convince the voice in her head.

Deeper it came with its hideous claw,
like a weight on her chest, but burning and raw.
The more she thought of its powerful pull,
the less, she felt, her heart would ever be full.

She sits back in the darkness remembering his touch.
And the thought, no the fact, that they loved each other so much.
But the mind is a powerful, multifaceted tool;
It yearns, it beckons, but can also make you its fool.

Alone now she cries, broken inside.
But an ember of her soul still longs to survive.
And with each passing night, alone in the dark,

She patiently waits for the Sun's morning spark.

Jude S. Walko is a film producer, director, screenwriter, and actor. He won the 2018 Eclipse Award for Best Direction for “The Incantation”. His horror novel *The Unhallowed Horseman* reimagines the infamous Headless Horseman. Jude is passionate about Halloween, Tim Burton, stop-motion animation and all things dark and mysterious.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

DEPRESSION IS A BITCH

Linda Kay Hardie

Because of her, my get-up-and-go
got up and went.
Where it went, I don't know,
and to be honest, I don't even care.
That's depression.
Bitch.

She turns my house into an episode
of *Hoarders*.
No energy to even bend down
and pick up what I've dropped.
Let it lie there until it can behave itself.
That's depression.
Bitch.

It's not writer's block
if I simply don't have the spoons
to tap the keyboard.
Or the energy to even
chronicle what happened today.
Let alone describe how I feel.
That's depression.
Bitch.

No energy
even to complain.
No energy
to look for a solution.
No energy
to ask for help.
No energy
even to care.
No energy
to cry.
Depression is a bitch.
But so am I.

When I find a spoon,
I take my traumas
and name them, characterize them.
Write them into stories.
I let them stalk me, but then
I kill them gruesomely

and gracefully.
And with glee.

(Pats fresh dirt with shovel)
Take that, bitch!

Linda Kay Hardie writes horror, crime, and fantasy stories, poetry, plus fiction for children. She also writes recipes, and is the reigning Nevada Spam champion (yes, the tasty treat canned mystery meat). Linda has a master's degree from University of Nevada, Reno, where she teaches required courses to unwilling students.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE WOMAN WHO WOKE ME

Graham Masterton

Her muted sobbing woke me, and I saw her there
Sitting in darkness in my bedroom chair
Although her head was covered by a wrap
Her tears were sparkling as they dropped into her lap.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked her. ‘What’s your name?’
She said, ‘You never mention me, for shame.
‘You always say that you’re without a care.
But you are hurting. I am your despair.

‘You won’t admit that you have lost all hope
Your strength, and your ability to cope.
Why won’t you take me with you, by the hand
And show me to your friends. They’ll understand.’

And so I did, and when I met my friends again
I led her forward, and I said, ‘This is my pain.
This is my lack of confidence and my self-esteem.’
With that, she smiled, and faded like a summer dream.

Graham Masterton is the author of more than 65 horror novels, the first being *The Manitou* and the latest being *The Soul Stealer*. He was recognised by the HWA with a Lifetime Achievement Award, and continues to write horror novels and short stories.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

MY WHY

Steve Stred

In 1996, I was at my lowest.

I was in Grade 10 and no longer wanted to keep going.

My parents and my family doctor admitted me to the nearest Psychiatric facility, in a town two hours away. Accompanied by only a book and some CDs, I went and found a way to hold onto hope.

It was there that the kernels of my first novel was born. That novel wouldn't be released until 2016, two decades later, but it gave me something tangible to strive for.

As my life has experienced ups and downs, my drive to take what is in my head; craft it, plot it, and put it onto paper has only increased.

And with that increase has also come the passion to help support, encourage and lift up those around me. Reading and writing are two of the most important elements in my life. They take me away from current events, from stress, anxiety, money, and health issues and transport me to other worlds, other places and with other people. Characters that bring me joy and heartache and happiness and sorrow.

At the lowest moments in my life, books and horror have always been there for me.

I've seen counsellors and therapists throughout the years, and one thing has been a constant—they've always praised my love of reading and writing.

My hope, is that I can continue to support and encourage other readers and writers out there, so that they too can find something to grab hold of and use, when they're at their lowest moments.

Sometimes, losing ourselves in another world is the exact thing we need to experience hope in this world.

Steve Stred is the Splatterpunk Nominated Author of *Sacrament* and *Mastodon*. Based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Steve has released over a dozen novels and novellas as well as a number of collections. He is a proud co-founder of the LOHF Writer's Grant and an Active Member of the HWA.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

BEDTIME STORIES

Patrick Tumblety

Her book is humorous
about black cats, broken mirrors
and thirteenth floors.
Magical thinking, I assure her.
Yet, my mind regresses to
bad luck, open closets,
and broken backs.
Ancient anxieties stir.

She doesn't want to plug in a nite-light,
close up the closet or crack the bedroom door.
"Are you sure?" I double-check.
"That's the fifth time you asked!"
Children always think they know more.

I lie in bed and think
about black cats, broken mirrors
and thirteenth floors.
While my daughter sleeps without doubt
I can't sleep until I've written this out,
and ensure that the collection of lines
equal an even number count.

Patrick Tumblety is featured in numerous anthologies, including *Tales of Jack the Ripper* (Word Horde Press), *Gothic Fantasy*, (Flame Tree Publishing), and *The Dead Inside*, (Dark Dispatch). His work has been described as being able to deliver both “genuine fear and genuine hope.” (Amy H. Sturgis—Professor of Narrative Studies)



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

AN EXCERPT FROM *TBI or CTE: WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH ME?*

Mark Tullius

Recognize all the positive coping mechanisms that you already have and become aware of the negative ones you can improve. Yoga, breathing, *jiu jitsu*, cannabis, talking with friends, writing, and doing a podcast—these were all things I did prior to this research that were keeping me somewhat sane without me realizing it.

Be kind to yourself for your past mistakes and move forward while taking responsibility for slipups and asking those you hurt for forgiveness. Trust others, confide in them, and try not to worry about being a burden or scaring them.

Live each day the very best you can. Keep positive. Keep going. This might be the toughest struggle you ever face but get after it. Be proactive. Accept help. Make this life as great as possible.

Even if I do develop CTE or another form of dementia, I've made my peace with that. If it occurs, I will intensify my coping mechanisms and make the most of it. But if all that truly matters is the present moment, both the past and future don't matter. Why be upset about something that may never happen? All I must strive for is a good day today, in this moment. If your day is filled with good moments, then that's a good day. If your life is full of good days, then that's a good life.

If you gained something from this book, I hope you will help spread the word and bring awareness. You may not know who in your life feels like something is off but cannot express what it is. Don't be embarrassed by your personal struggles because the person right next to you may be silently fighting similar demons. Make the world a better place by sharing your story.

Mark Tullius is an author whose fiction spans horror, sci-fi, and suspense. He's the creator of the *Try Not to Die* series and also writes nonfiction about brain damage and published the largest study of MMA fighters with *Unlocking the Cage: Exploring the Motivations of MMA Fighters*.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE BARRETTE

Douglas Gwilym

I suffer from social anxiety. You might not know it, because I'm lit up by performance. I love presenting my stories in public, singing, and playing bass in bands. But I did not always have a handle on playing to a crowd. Overcoming stage fright is a process, and it happens by degrees. But I have a good friend to thank for the one breakthrough I won't forget.

Way back when I was working on my MA, I was in a stressy place. I was at a job 30 hours a week as a background investigator for airlines and nuclear facilities, had a graduate assistantship and a full course load, and was playing in two bands. One of those bands got the chance to be in an old-fashioned "battle" with cash prizes and studio time if you won.

Instead of just having fun, I convinced myself it was a *big deal*. An opportunity I couldn't miss. My *chance*. When I do that—when we do that—it's like dipping our toes in quicksand. *Oooh—feels good. Might as well try standing up in the stuff, right?*

So I spent weeks working myself into a frenzy. Moments before the show was to begin, I showed my buddy Chloe my hands. They were "shaking like milk," if you know your Cure references.

She said, "You can do this," and stuck her hand in my hair. Snapped a bright pink barrette there she'd apparently stolen from a first-grader.

I took a deep breath. Found myself grinning. Got up and *played*.

Sometimes something simple or stupid can help you break through. Friends are a good place to look for the kindness you need, and for a reminder that it's *not* such a big deal. Not so big you should forget to have fun, anyway.

Author and editor **Douglas Gwilym** has been known to compose a weird-fiction rock opera or two. He's edited four years of the anthology *Triangulation*, and taught at Alpha Young Writers workshop. He reads proto-Weird classics on YouTube and has stories in *LampLight*, *Novel Noctule*, *Creepy*, *Penumbric*, and *Tales to Terrify*.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

A LIGHT IN THE CHAOS

Christopher Ryan

We buried my mother on my birthday. I was stern throughout, and for weeks afterwards. Resolute that I had made my peace with all the pain she had visited upon our family. I've come to understand that none of it was her fault. She was born with special needs that her generation was not equipped to deal with, specifically borderline personality disorder and histrionic personality disorder. My father, the dutiful husband, took her to doctors who prescribed the best solutions medicine had at the time: electroshock therapy (she underwent over 20 treatments) and encouraging my father to "keep her pregnant" because "that would even out her chemistry."

Not surprisingly, we grew up in a psychologically, verbally, and sometimes physically violent household where nothing ever remained logical or fair or consistent. To escape the screeching anger, I stayed in a small room shared with my brothers and read whatever was on the shelf. That led me to horror novels. At first, I resisted. Why would I want to submit to scares when what was going on outside that fragile door was already a nightmare? But curiosity and a need to escape got the better of me, and those stories showed the nobility of regular people in the face of chaos. Horror helped me get through.

These days mental health is understood in much better detail. There are diagnoses that explain what is happening, and more humane treatments are available, offering a safe port in the maelstrom. Doesn't mean everyone's lives are easy; there is still plenty of heartache to go around. But we can be more aware these days. And by offering understanding rather than lashing out or ostracizing, we can help keep most of the horror inside the pages.

Christopher Ryan, the recording secretary for HWA-NY, writes fast-paced stories with humor and heart. Recent credits include an essay in the 2022 *Running Home to Shadows* collection, and stories in the 2021 crime anthology *Now, That Was A Story* and 2020 BoucherCon anthology *California Schemin'*. On social media as [chrisryanwrites](#).



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

POSTSCRIPT POSTMORTEM

Ken MacGregor

Dear Spouse,

I don't remember our vows, specifically. I do remember that somewhere in there we each spoke a version of the classic "Till death do we part". I was 34, and you 26: we had *decades*.

Except we didn't, did we? We had almost exactly seventeen years. Seventeen years and eight days, to be precise. That's when you died.

And now, I'm left here—wounded but alive—raising our kids on my own. I'm hanging tough, trying to figure out what life without you is supposed to look like. It's been almost four years, so it's getting...easier. I guess.

However, there are things I want to say to you. Important, heart-wrenching things to be sure. But mundane, everyday, boring things too. All the things.

I expected you to be there when our kids graduated high school. When they first fell in love. When they moved out, one and then the other, to make it on their own. "Till death do us part" was supposed to be in our eighties or nineties. Not when I was barely past fifty. Felt like we were just getting started.

No one tells you this part about being widowed. All the things that get left unsaid. And the frustration that comes with that. All the times I turn my head to tell you something, only to realize, all over again, that you're gone.

Since I can't talk to you anymore, I write horrible things. Call it cheap therapy. Catharsis. Pain disguised as fiction. With each story, I purge a little more darkness. I get a bit lighter. Fictional horror is helping me to overcome real-life horror. Some of the things I never got to say to you are now in print. It's my final "I love you." My last goodbye

Love,
Spouse

Ken MacGregor writes stuff. He has three story collections, an award-winning YA novella, and a co-written novel. Ken has curated two original anthologies. Ken drives the bookmobile for his local library. He lives with his kids, two cats, and the ashes of his wife. Ken lurks at kenmacgregor.com.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

A CANDLE IN THE DARK

Marge Simon

You are alone in darkness. You're afraid to stand, afraid you might fall. You hear the strike of a match. A candle flares, lighting the features of a strange young man. You try grabbing for the candle, but he vanishes. Just like your life, everything you try is a failure. You can die here in the dark, nobody will give a fuck.

But then you hear the scratch of a match again, and again the young man's face appears. This time, he is smiling, holding a sheet of paper. There is nothing on the paper. He hands you a pen. "Here is your candle, and this paper is your tinder. You can make your own light, you're not alone. There are writers like you who've been in this room with me, just as down as you are. Every one of them has seen my candle and gotten my message. They're ready to help you, too.

You let him guide you through the blackness until you see a crack of light coming from a door. He gives you a nod and disappears. It's up to you to open it.

THE STAIRS

Marge Simon

You are the man ascending the stairs,
hunched, contorted, hands tied behind your back,
a tree of owls in your eyes.

You carry the weight of suppressed rain,
the death of land, the seasons of stress
etched in the planes of your face.

Underneath the fingerprint of plague,
in the shaved blue dark, you bow down,
consumed with worry for the future.

Should you fail to mount the topmost stair
Reach out to us, your fellow writers,
Happy to give a boost at a needful time.

Marge Simon lives in Ocala, Florida. Her works have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Abyss & Apex*, *New Myths*, more. A multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association. She recently received the HWA Lifetime Achievement Award.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

PHYSICIAN HEAL THYSELF

Theresa Derwin

When I first became ill, I attended counselling.

At the time, counselling wasn't much help apart from one piece of advice; 'The pen is truly mightier than the sword.'

So I wrote it all down; how I felt each day, what brought me down, what made me feel better, immersing myself in horror books and films. My soul, my heart, and my mind were scattered on pages for all to see and know me.

I discovered how working my way through pain could help me. It wouldn't cure my Fibromyalgia, but it would help me to cope when the nights were at their darkest.

A couple of years ago I came across an article you may all know.

Final Girl: A Life in Horror, Christina Sng, 23 Oct 2020. Sng talked about how cathartic writing was for her, and how writing horror in particular, helped her deal with troubled emotions.

Through writing fanfic, my journal, blogs and stories, I've found a little of the peace stolen from me over the years.

Slowly, day by day, I'm building a quality of life with little things; a coffee with my sister, reading books, writing reviews to share with my friends. I'm writing everything that springs to mind.

I 'Marie Kondo'd' my psyche.

I'm more than my illness. I'm more than my walking stick, my stumbling legs, my tired eyes, or my inability to carry a heavy bag. I'm more than my depression, more than the pain that hits me worse at night, and more than the fat person who put weight on because I didn't care about myself. I care who I am now.

I'm the daughter, the sister, the aunt, and the friend. The girl, and the woman, you knew before.

I have found my new voice.

HWA member **Theresa Derwin** writes Urban Fantasy, Horror and Horror Erotica, with over sixty anthology acceptances and recently made her second pro rate sale. Her MA is in Creative Writing. She is the 2019 HWA Mary Shelley Scholarship recipient and a Seers Table contributor. Twitter @BarbarellaFem Instagram @theresa.derwinauthor



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

UNSHAKABLE, IRRATIONAL FEAR

Lisa Lane

Rarely do people justifiably portray agoraphobia in fiction. The player is typically lonely, sometimes a hoarder, usually not entirely likeable. Fiction almost always shows the experience from the outside, failing at exposing the actual horrors that lie within. Changes in camera aspect ratio or shifts to stream-of-consciousness writing often fall short of offering true and immersive depictions of how it feels to live with this relatively rare condition.

I like to use spiders.

Imagine, if you will, that you are terrified of spiders, and you happen to live in a world infested with them. Webbing is *everywhere*. Creatures skitter off in all directions every time you open your front door, and you must break through a thick layer of silk just to leave your home every day. The sound of scurrying legs brings beads of sweat to your forehead, and no matter how much antiperspirant you use, your armpits are invariably saturated before you even make it in to work.

You're afraid people think you're always nervous because you've done something wrong. After all, your fears are silly; no one else randomly breaks out in panic over the spiders' presence. No one else occasionally flees home to safety because they can't take it anymore. No one else's breath catches in their throat when a spider drops from the ceiling and rushes across their path.

Living with agoraphobia isn't about surviving a weakness; it's about being afraid and stepping out that front door anyway. I'm not afraid of spiders like most people are. I am, however, terrified of the big, scary world. Anxiety used to paralyze me. Now, I face it. Sometimes, I tremble when I need to go somewhere. Sometimes, I even cry. I'm still okay.

We don't choose our fears, but we can choose who we are despite them.

Lisa Lane has been writing dark sci-fi and horror for over twenty-five years. Although most of her works carry elements of dystopian and psychological horror, she's not averse to delving into the gritty and the extreme. Her biggest influences are Serling, Matheson, Vonnegut, Orwell, Wells, Poe, King, and Dahl.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

EXORCISING MY DEMONS

Samantha Arthurs

Horror has given
Me a way
To escape the demons
Inside of my head
By letting them out
On paper instead

When I'm sad
And I'm anxious
I remain hopeful
Because ghosts,
Legends, and lore
Are the things
That keep me going

Kinship too
Is important
We share our struggles
Our triumphs
Our falls
But this love of horror
Keeps us together
Through it all

Samantha Arthurs is the author of the Rust series, the Rag & Bone trilogy, The Dreadful Seasons series, *Murder Mittens*, and *My First Exorcism*. She lives happily with her dogs and black cat in the middle of nowhere.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

OF MONSTERS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Sarah Sigfried

Few things have been consistent in my life since childhood. My love of horror and the horrors of recurrent Major Depressive Disorder are two of them. Depression is very real and more terrifying than any tale I've read or written. I intimately know this monster from my own personal experiences as well as in my day job as a mental health clinician. I have degrees and certificates and credentials, but that doesn't prevent depression from attacking me. All of Dr. Van Helsing's knowledge didn't prevent Dracula from existing, but the good doctor was able to fight the monster.

Depression is my monster. It is most powerful in the darkness where it hides. Scary things reside in dark spaces, such as the feelings and perceptions I have experienced in the depths of depressed mindspace. It also thrives on the ongoing stigma, which prevents seeking supports and getting treatment. The stigma of depression made it very hard for me to seek mental health services in my community, despite my profession. Monsters attack unsuspecting characters who go alone to explore the dark basement or trudge the deep woods. Depression separates me from my loved ones. Depression whispers, "They don't want you. You're not worthy," so I go alone. Don't do that.

If horror characters don't continuously keep moving forward, the monsters will sneak up on them. If I don't continuously work on my wellness daily, depression sneaks up on me. When I trip up or fall down, it pounces on me. Have hope, though! We all know that monsters can be defeated and kept at bay in some way. Instead of garlic and crosses, therapy, social supports, medication, and writing horror have helped me to ward off my monster. You can fight yours too!

Sarah Sigfried is an emerging author from rural Virginia. She pens short stories with twists as well as twisted endings. She enjoys classic horror movies and 1980's horror comedies. She lives in a home originally built by a mortician and enjoys running and not finding bodies in the woods.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

EXPOSED

Jesse Rosenbaum

The voice in my head returned as I frustratingly stared at the blinking cursor on the empty page.

“I don’t know why you keep trying. No one wants to read your drivel. You know that don’t you?” it said.

Annoyed, I pursed my lips and shut my eyes tight before I responded. “I’m not listening to you.”

Still, the voice persisted, “There’s a reason that screen is blank, and that reason is you lack imagination and skill.”

I slammed my hand down onto the top of the desk. “Shut up!” I yelled aloud.

The voice just laughed at me. “The more you deny me, the more you fight, the weaker you get as I drain you of your confidence and motivation. Surely, you must have noticed. Keep it up because your struggle just makes me stronger like those vampires you so love to read about.”

“I’m stronger than you think,” I rebutted.

Defiantly, I started to type my thoughts down into the computer and for the first time in an exceptionally long time, I sensed a hesitation in the voice as it replied, “What are you doing right now?” Then, I heard worry. “What’s happening? Something feels different.”

I smiled as I continued typing. “You like to refer to yourself as a vampire. Well, I am doing the one thing vampires hate; I’m exposing you to the light of day by writing you into my story.”

Panic set in for the voice. “You can’t do that. Stop it now!”

“It’s too late,” I said with a smirk, “Now the world will see you for the powerless leech that you are. You have no power over me anymore. You won’t make me feel inadequate anymore and, just like the vampires I read about, you die in the daylight.”

Jesse Rosenbaum is a proud HWA member and writer, whose first novel, *The Condemned*, was published in April 2021. He's an avid reader with a love for the horror, mystery, science fiction and thriller genres. Jesse lives in Florida with his wife and daughter.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE WORD FLESHIE

Liam Burke

“You made too many mistakes, Jane,” Peterson said. “You’ll have to run this report again.”

She nodded and smiled, refusing to react to the dripping mass of squirming gray flesh pushing itself from his mouth. It plopped wetly on her desk, and urgently ran for her. Thousands of needle-like feet propelled it forward, sprouting from its frayed-rope body.

She assured Peterson she’d understood, never breaking eye contact or expression as she leaned forward and quickly covered the Word Fleshie with her lunch Tupperware. Peterson, mollified, returned to his office.

Inside the plastic, the Fleshie sought escape, scratching at the container. Jane took deep breaths. She’d built the tools to deal with this in therapy. Her medication helped her reflexes, allowing her to catch Fleshies before they reached her. Allowed her to use those tools.

Once alone, she opened her desk drawer, pulling out a black Sharpie, a thick yellow rubber band, and a restrained Hurtful Fleshie. Its band read: “Why do you even work here?” It was identifiably harmful. She kept it for comparisons.

One hand holding the jostling Tupperware, she wrote Peterson’s words on a new band, and stretched it around her fingers. She took another breath, and picked up the Tupperware.

As the Fleshie screeched and lunged, she snatched it up. She deftly bound it into a ball of needle legs and sticky skin, and placed it next to the Hurtful Fleshie. She held a finger near each. Peterson’s Fleshie ignored her, continuing to struggle. The Hurtful Fleshie snapped viciously.

She nodded. Peterson’s was unpleasant, but harmless.

Jane returned the Hurtful Fleshie, and sighed. She unbound the new Fleshie, shuddering as it scuttled up her body and into her ear. It felt bad, but life did sometimes. She was glad she had the tools to tell the difference.

Liam Burke: I am an independent author with a penchant for a variety of speculative fiction. My main passion is for juxtaposing biting humor along with the sharp teeth of horror, razor code of cyberpunk, and back alley deals of urban fantasy.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

AGORAPHOBIA

Kerry E.B. Black

(Wishing peace for those afflicted, especially my little Bear.)

From an early age, she feared him,
The Boogeyman of the unknown.
He hid around the next corner
lurked beneath access ramps—
The only safe place, home.

He distracted her mother
Waylaid siblings, too,
To provide the opportunity
To snatch her from their midst—
Relentless, he pursued.

He knew her daily schedule,
Could read her grieving mind
Mapped out opportunities
To capture, crush, consume
She lived life terrified.

Her insides roiled reaction,
Hives assaulted skin,
Stomach secreted sentences,
Dizzy, disoriented disorder—
Fight and flight kicking in.

So the best action to take
Was challenge every outing,
Balk at leaving home,
And hunker down to hide—
Until the danger's passing.

Kerry E.B. Black writes from a crowded house sinking into a swamp in the land where Romero's Dead Dawned. This "Teller of Tales Fanciful and True" has been described as "Chicken Soup for the Gothic Soul." For writing updates and events, please follow WWW.KerryEBBlack.com (and other social media.)



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THIS WRETCHED CURSE

Brýn Grover

It's hard to differentiate
What's real or an imagined weight
The demons I face deep within
Bring pain and doubt and much chagrin

But I put on a happy smile
And face the world in clouds of guile
I feel like no one can relate,
Provide succor or set things straight

And should the world see through my sham
And find out who I really am
I'd hear the cries within my mind
Outcast! Leper! You're not our kind!

The stigma of my mental woes
If known, would but create more foes
Serving to generate more strife
And make me want to take my life

While hope is real, the pain is too.
I'm trapped and don't know what to do.
My mind works overtime and yet
There lurks this ever-present threat.

Breathe deep and meditate and pray
Tomorrow is another day
One day is fine. The next is worse
I'm trapped inside a wretched curse

To ask for help seems dangerous
And fraught with hurdles treacherous
Should I seek help or wallow here
In quiet pain and this great fear?

The demons within hold their sway.
Can I dare face another day?
I can't decide which fate is worse
While trapped inside this wretched curse

And yet another option seems

To permeate my thoughts and dreams
I can with pen and paper write
About the nightmares in the night

An option to me then appears—
Releasing evil thoughts and fears
In stories dark and horrid tales
Of ghosts and the dread Banshee's wails

I've left the therapy behind
I know now how to clear my mind
I'll channel madness through my pen
And pass it on to other men

Brýn Grover (pronounced Bryan) lives in No. Virginia. He's an author of horror, sci fi, fantasy tales and poetry. Raised in Drive-in Theaters, watching B Movies, and reading the likes of Lovecraft all while doing bomb drills during the cold war helped influence his imagination and subsequently his writing.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

WORDS TO FILL THE WELL

Jennifer Brozek

It starts with bad news, a bad thought, a bad argument. It takes hold of one's hope and holds it hostage. The mind spirals down a dark well of evil moods and eviler assumptions, theories, suppositions, conspiracies. It is a never-ending well of pain with no way out.

Except one: Words.

Read words.

A story that draws you in, shows you the face of horror, revels in your terror, then without pretense, allows you to win. To face the bad guy, the bad thought, the bad news, and come out victorious. A story to show that, against all odds, you can overcome all obstacles. All things are possible—if for only a little while between the pages of a book.

You can become that same light with words.

Written words.

A poem, a story, a novella, a novel that traverses perilous lands and dangerous thoughts where horror exists but hope, too, exists. Write. Write your way to the light and become a beacon for another in need, another who has found themselves at the bottom of a deep and dark well with no hope of making it home. Show them the candle in the darkness. Show them the way out.

Be the story that walks between the reader and all the empty places they must go.

Write, and be the words we all need to hear.

Jennifer Brozek is a wordslinger and optimist, an author and an editor, and a collector of antique occult literature. She believes the best thing about being a full-time freelance publishing industry professional is the fact that she gets to choose which 60 hours of the week she works. Website: jenniferbrozek.com.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

CCD, OR WHY I KEEP TAKING THE PILLS SO MANY OF YOU IDIOTS SAY I WOULDN'T NEED IF I JUST TOUCHED THE GRASS MORE

Anton Cancre

It starts with the drones, desperate
with need and overcome with desire
to fly the fields, dip their legs
in fluffy petal sperm and slurp the sweet
syrup that brings life to the hive.

But the field is too wide, the budding brightness
of flowers too plentiful, refracted through thousands
of ommatidia, until they overwhelm with their number
and blur together, like Van Gogh smearing his hand across
his Irises before the paint dried. the need to fill themselves
from each remains and wires start to cross. misfire.

A misfiring that turns to an interior buzzing
so loud, so consuming, that they can't hear anything else.
So they buzz louder, flitting so close to their desired buds
that the scent becomes too much to bear, unable to land
on any one in the encompassing need to sup from them all.
The static of their noise becoming aggressive, a threat
against one and all near. Stingers filling with venom.
Air filled with the secret screaming only bees know.

Until they slow. Overworked
wings giving up. Bodies
falling to the grass
in exhaustion
and disappointment.

And the queen

and her consorts
are left, huddling
in the dark of the hive.
Terrified.
Alone.
listless and uncertain.
With no idea of what
left them in the black,
suffocating and starving,
as a deeper dark creeps
in to take them.

Anton Cancre writes odd, obsessive, dark poetry in Ohio. His most recent collection, *This Story Doesn't End the Way We Want All the Time*, is available through Dragon's Roost Press and on Amazon. His work has appeared in *Space and Time*, *Siren's Call*, and *Recompose*.

<https://antoncancre.blogspot.com/>



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

APART—A PART

Ai Jiang

Their fingers, long, lack
like untied laced weaved
into her ears, over the whites,
the irises, before digging
into the pupils, intertwining
with her brain. The shift
of control was swift.
For what else could you control
without your thinking minds?
Nothing? No, not nothing.
Even as you bleed nails
and loosened joints through ears
uncovered by immobile hands,
you have awareness
of the way their darkness veins
you lips, forces them to move,
exposing your dark thoughts,
violent thoughts, inhuman
thoughts not meant to be heard
by those you love, even if they
too are thinking much the same.
These fingers, these hands,
forcing your eyes blind,
mouth to dribble evil,
they belong to your loved ones.
You stare into another's black
streamer crossed eyes and lean
and continue to lean, to fall,
to collide, to merge
until you cannot tell yourselves
apart. And you ask, were you ever
apart or just a part?

Ai Jiang is a Chinese-Canadian writer and an immigrant from Fujian. She is a member of HWA, SFWA, and Codex. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in F&SF, The Dark, PseudoPod, Prairie Fire, Hobart Pulp, The Masters Review—among others. Find her on Twitter (@AiJiang_) and online (<http://aijiang.ca>).



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

A SKETCH OF HOPE

Ryan C. Countrymen

From my imagination onto a sheet of paper, flowing through the graphite of a number two pencil, I sketch the protagonist in a story I have yet to write. Scratches and swirls, lines both light and dark, merge to form a sad, twenty-something woman with a pale complexion and freckles. She has no name yet, but what she does have is all the baggage I carry—loneliness, anxiety, and the perpetual ache of never being good enough. She's a proxy for the torment that stirs within me. She'll slay the monsters in the fictional world I create for her, the monsters I'm unable to slay in my own world.

I sketch the last wisps of her hair, she blinks and gasps for air, coming alive on paper, a birth of sorts. She's frantic, frenetic, scratching at the edge of the paper, attempting to comprehend her sudden sense of being. Her hundreds of sketched lines dart around the page like a haphazardly scrawled flipbook.

Her eyes lock onto mine. Is that anger? Her sketched hands grow in the frame of the paper as they reach for me, breaching the two-dimensional plane, wrapping around my neck, and pulling me into the page. My body, now a messy scribble of lines itself, is toe to toe with my creation. Defenseless against her advance, I close my eyes and brace for my demise.

But, there's no violence.

Instead, a morphine warmth washes over as she embraces me. She tells me it's going to be okay, that, together, we'll be fine.

When my eyes open, I'm staring down at the paper. My creation stares back, a content smile on her face, wet spots dotted about her head from where my tears fell. I thank her because I know, together, we will indeed be fine.

A Phoenix, AZ, native, **Ryan C. Countrymen** is an author of short horror fiction, with a special interest in the psychological aspects of horror. When not writing, Ryan likes to spend time with his wife and two kids or playing guitar.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THESE LETTERS OF MINE

Emily Ruth Verona

obsessive compulsive disorder—
this is the diagnosis

omnipotent, calculating devil—
the name by which I know it

otherness: comical, deranged—
your superficial interpretation

occasionally chronic, debilitating—
how it blooms within

obscene, cauterizing delusions—
I lose myself to them

overt, consumptive, deadly—
hell swollen in the brain

onward, courage darling—
we must write our own way out

obstinate, critical, divine—
*this acronym (anarchist);
these letters of mine*

Emily Ruth Verona is a Bram Stoker Award nominee, a Jane Austen Short Story Award Finalist, and a Luke Bitmead Bursary Finalist. Publication credits include work featured in *The Pinch*, *Lamplight Magazine*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Black Telephone Magazine*, *The Ghastling*. She lives in New Jersey with a very small dog.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

ADVERSITY DOESN'T NECESSARILY INTRODUCE US TO OURSELVES, BUT FEAR DOES: A REFLECTION

Amanda Worthington

Fear introduces us to ourselves. In Horror, we see our own insecurities and hardships reflected.

I first read Stephen King when I was 12. I had a dictionary on hand to look up all the words I didn't know (Neeeeerd). As I moved from *Salem's Lot* onto *The Shining* and *It* (among others), I felt connected to characters who were undergoing much of what I was. I saw portraits of addiction and thought about how my father had destabilized our household. I thought of my sick mother and how I might save her. I thought of the feeling of powerlessness that held me in its clutches.

And underneath it all, I was afraid. The books I read didn't dare to whisper that I shouldn't be; they merely suggested that the feeling of isolation is a lot more universal than we make it out to be.

The best horror is vulnerable, prodding, uncomfortable—but it also feels like progress. It is the burying and the unearthing both. This genre asks the hard questions. The questions I was asking when I was lying in the dark on those nights when the walls were too thin, and sleep wouldn't come; or when I was forced to babysit my dad, so he didn't run off to the casino: *What does a good father look like? Why does God seem to care about some people and not about others? Is there a God? Why are we here? What is love, really? Am I worthy of it?*

Add to this list one final question, the one that drives my own work, the one that should precede all meaningful decision or discourse: *What If?*

Amanda Worthington lives in the greater Kansas City metropolitan area with her partner and 2 cats. Her favorite genres happen to be dystopian and psychological horror. She is a lifelong lover of the genre, but fairly new to taking this writing thing seriously.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

HORROR IS MY LIFE

Nicole Henning

I've lost count of how many times I've been asked "What's with you and horror?" As I look around my house, which is covered in horror memorabilia, I can't help but to smile. To me, horror is a cathartic experience in some of the deepest ways. Horror allows me to experience emotions I may be too scared to release on my own. It helps me work through my own trauma and mental illness by presenting emotions and scenarios in a safe way.

Writing horror is an exercise in emotional recognition and acceptance for me. Composing the stories helps me get the emotions out, I can pour them into my characters and live through them. While I was self-admitted to my local psychiatric ward, I found I engaged in a lot of fiction writing. The more I worked with the therapists and social workers the more the words flowed. My character's exhibited the same mental illnesses I have and worked through them in ways I was learning there. The creation of these pieces helps me not feel as much shame over my mental state.

Every time I get into an anthology, or a publisher is interested in one of my pitches, I find myself feeling acceptance of my mental issues. Writing horror is an act of healing for me, and I hope that others will feel a connection to my work. I try to make realistic characters with mental illnesses and help them work in healthy ways to grow and learn. Horror has saved my life more than once and I don't see that ever changing. The act of writing horror is a release of my hopes and fears, and sometimes as I work characters through their challenges, I think of new ways to help myself. It's an amazing feeling.

Nicole Henning is a horror and paranormal romance addict and faithfully uses life as a source of inspiration. Her goal when it comes to writing is to make her readers feel a spectrum of emotions. Horror is a huge part of her life.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

TO BE

Jason Parent

I know what true depression is
Maybe, it defines me
To be me
To be what I am
Engulfed by torment
Swallowed by Hell
I look not for pity
I search not for patronizing, thoughtless false caring
But only for an explanation into what I am
I strive for faint mirages and reckless dreams
Only to be overcome by desolate sensations of unknown origin
Emptiness controls. Sorrow prevails
Choking on desolation
Vomitus, wretched, violent
A familiar, unrelenting taste
I have nothing; I have no one
I love nothing; I love no one
I am nothing; I am no one
Fate aligned with melancholy
Captured by grief in an inescapable hold
Humanity is the coldest of words
Without connection
Without identity
Without hope
I am dead, yet I breathe
And tomorrow, I will live

Jason Parent is an author of horror and thrillers, though his many novels and short stories tend to blur the boundaries between genres. His most recent novel, *Unbalanced*, is a psychological thriller that delves deep into mental illness and society's fragile constructs meant to support those who suffer from it.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

OVERACTIVE IMAGINATION

W. D. County

“Your house is not a dungeon,” the doctor said to me.
“Curb your imagination, then you’ll begin to see.”
“The monster seemed so handsome,” I said quite shrill with fright.
“Yet chained me every morning, and bit me every night.”
Doc’s smile, so patronizing, so like the Cheshire Cat
Revealed no understanding of monster, crypt, or bat.
“You need some medication, I’m certain that’s the key
To ease your consternation and high anxiety.”
I left the office lacking a brave protective knight.
No drug provides escape from my unrelenting plight.
The chill of night came after the doctor-patient chat.
Then teeth that pricked my neck from the fanged aristocrat.

W.D. County writes in the horror and science fiction genres, often with a touch of irony or mysticism. His short stories have appeared in the e-zine *Spinetingler* and various anthologies. His novels include *Plastic Soldiers*, and *The Scent of Distant Worlds*. He holds a Master of Fine Arts in writing.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

GHOSTS OF PROPRIUM

Slade Templeton

The pen struck the page, slashing at the white nothingness with ink blots surrounding the letters like pools of forgotten blood. Although a ghost was there—I felt it—the letters weren't telling me much.

“Is this even my hand holding this pen?” I said, turning to a blank page.

The part of me that wrote was always invisible. The spirit hand. As I wrote, my mind twisted into some forgotten truce of what could and couldn't be.

Focusing on the dots my pen slapped onto the page, I tapped them into geometric patterns.

“It's always impossible to understand what I want to say.”

Slowly I ripped another failed attempt out from the metal rings and folded it neatly for the trash can.

“These words are as hard for me to read as emotions on someone's face. Forget the pen,” I muttered, grabbing my laptop.

The machine's interior blades spun, pushing out heat. Soon I was sweating beads, wishing I had my own exhaust fan, even though it would slice my intestines to shreds.

“You're so literal. Why do you see everything so literally?”

The typing began; I noticed the rhythmic sounds before I saw the words. Letters emerged and the story started to make sense. The ghosts on the page were revealing themselves.

“How can I find this feeling with a mind so bent?”

The ghost let go of me just enough to let the narrative take form. As I resumed typing, the words slanted.

Anxiety became my second breath.

Autism was my first.

“This could have written itself.”

And it just had. This is *Autism*, my ghost, leaving me with a broken mind but a beautiful curse.

Slade Templeton is a Switzerland-based, American-born musician, record producer, and published fiction author (*Truth of the Shadows* 2020), living and working in Bern. Since a very young age, he has had a passion for anything dark, including art, music, and film.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

LIVING IN HELL

By M. Lee Goodson

I write every day about living with mental illness and I often compare it to the myth of Sisyphus. He's a man in hell, who is stuck forever rolling a boulder up a hill. Once it gets to the top of the hill, the boulder rolls back down the hill, and he must start all over again. For me, that's what living with mental illness is like. It's a journey through hell where every time I think I am on stable ground, I find myself falling and having to start all over again. Just like Sisyphus, I find myself at the bottom of the hill having to roll that boulder up that hill one more time.

And just like Sisyphus, I realize that all good stories aren't just about the beginnings or endings, they need the plot, too. I have hope in my life because while I may have a difficult journey that goes through hell; my story has meaning.

M. Lee Goodson has an M.A. in English and Creative Writing from Southern New Hampshire University. She is a new writer who lives in Texas with her husband and three dogs. She hopes to bring a unique voice since she sees the world through the eyes of mental illness.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE CONSTANT OUTSIDER

Rosemary Thorne

I was only four when I saw a giant sleeping in the central aisle of my school's chapel.

"Can you see him?" I asked the other girls.

"What?" they replied.

"Can't you see the giant sleeping in front of us?" I insisted, pointing at an empty space.

The girls stepped back from me and eventually a nun got me out of the church and into the main office.

"What's all that nonsense?" she scolded, forcing me to confess to the lie.

But I didn't because it wasn't a false statement. I did see it. Soon afterward, of course, I was expelled for having "a too vivid imagination". Thus began my "career" as an outsider, quite early in my life.

Some authors claim that children do have hallucinations and vivid imaginings. Mine was not an entirely unnatural event. There are even cultures that teach how to turn this ability into an asset, instead of demonizing this potential power of the mind, among other capabilities. Storytelling has proven to be a healthy habit that can help children cope with the extraordinary, whatever its nature. An environment of open-mindedness and tolerance could foster new definitions of what makes us human. When I became an HWA member, I was looking for that: travel companions with horror, the inexplicable and violence (sometimes unfathomable) running throughout their lives.

With this "Horror & Hope project", we learn that each individual is but a walking mystery. Here we stand for one another to control the domino effect when the shadow and the doubt become too heavy and overwhelming.

Guess what? With the curiosity of a four-year-old girl, I'm still trying to produce magic in the air. And on the paper. Sane. Or close enough.

Rosemary Thorne is a Spanish bilingual writer, researcher and translator living in Spain. Bachelor in Journalism, with a Master's Degree in Librarianship, she decided to become an HWA member in 2019 to live the Horror Genre in English terms.



GENERATIONS OF THE IMAGINARIUM

Sumiko Saulson

My mother was a griot in the streets of L.A.
On a crushed velvet poster sold back in the day
Where a woman in profile wore an Afro, natural hair wild and free
And in the cursive before her, my mom's poetry

I was a Seventies child in braids and rollerskates
Pouring my internal life out on paper with pen,
Crafting imaginary worlds from within
Entire galaxies growing just under my skin

I have always had a lot of imagination
Sometimes my mind gets the better of me
For I feel, smell, and envision things others can't see
Psychotic features, in the parlance of psychiatry

In the imaginarium, where my characters lie
There are such conversations between them and I
When those conversations grow loud enough, others can hear
I get kind of embarrassed when others are near

My grandfather spoke to himself in the streets
If I've walked in his shoes, then I walked with my feet
Down the alleyway dark arguing with myself
It's not always the greatest...my own mental health

There are system malfunctions, where I start to unwind
In and out of hospitals, kind of losing my mind
It gets pulled back together, but in a new state
Multiple minds conflate, join, and then separate

I was blessed with a mom who could self-advocate
And could advocate for both her father and me
Who taught her children and grandchildren self-advocacy
And a sense of self-esteem and personal identity
As members of the disability rights community

Sumiko Saulson is an award-winning author of Afrosurrealist and multicultural sci-fi and horror, author of the Elgin-nominated collection *Within Me Without Me*, and the novel *Happiness and Other Diseases* is available on Mocha Memoirs Press. Recipient of the Afrosurrealist Writers Award (2018) and the Richard Layman Presidents Award (2021).



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

LIMINALITY

Donna Lynch

Tomorrow
and for months to come
I may be somewhere else
Somewhere high above health
Too far from fear
to be safe or salvaged
For in this awful, stairless
glittering high-rise
there is only the now
only the need
and only one way down

Yet tomorrow
and for months to come
I may be in a place
So dark that it doesn't exist
That can't be described
because it doesn't have function
it doesn't have form
it was never designed for living
It was never designed at all

But as I write this now
I am in the between
in the halls
and deserted spaces
the nearly empty pools
the waiting rooms
and there isn't much here
but they are far better shelters
than unstable glass towers
and infinite pits

These echoing thresholds
unremarkable passages
and liminal spaces
are the only places
where I exist as myself
quiet and calm

I am a stranger
within any other structure
and I am nothing
when I'm in the void
but I do what I can
—as the architect—
to make it look welcoming
and marketable
for as long as possible.

Donna Lynch is horror/ dark fiction author, singer, lyricist, spoken word artist, and two-time Stoker Award-nominated and LOHF award-winning poet. She has published eight poetry collections, two novels and a novella. She and artist/ musician Steven Archer, are the founding members of the dark rock band Ego Likeness.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE HORROR OF OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Peter Dennis Pautz

I have been a psychotherapist for over 30 years, specializing in couples, families, individuals, children, and medical family therapy.

During that time, I became amazed at the most important thing about how human beings function, something I never heard in a lecture or read in a textbook or journal article.

There was one thing I believe all my patients had in common, spread out on top of whatever problem with which they originally presented. Whether it was depression or abuse, PTSD or marital strife, anxiety or an autoimmune disorder.

That thing was obvious for some, deeply buried or denied in others.

And as the decades wore on, I noticed it moving into societal and political realms, as well, until the fracturing and vindictiveness we see daily on every news venue.

Generalization.

Whether writing fiction, listening to commentary, or working with people, generalization is truly the “Kiss of Death.”

In writing, generalization creates stock characters, without flesh or three dimensions. Plots are mere replays or unintentional pastiches.

Entering therapy, that way of thinking creates blockages to seeing people, events, and relationships as anything other than unique, individual, and specific truths. The brush becomes world-wide. “All Republications __, All Asians __, All atheists __ ... fill in our own blank.

At the most basic level, we stop paying attention, stop listening, stop thinking.

Pay attention!

That’s how it begins.

The inroad to a great first line, an innovative plot, an interesting character.

True connections, with family or friends or strangers.

Without generalization, you can’t see the world as “all...”, “every...”, or “never ...”.

Then you can keep the horror on the page and out of your life.

Open-mindedness can be most terrifying, except for the alternatives.

Pete Pautz served as the Executive Secretary of the SFWA, Inc., for 20 years. He co-edited the WFA-winning anthology, *The Architecture of Fear*, and *Nebula Winners Fifteen* with Frank Herbert. He's sold stories on both sides of the Atlantic. He is a Life Member of the SFWA, HWA, and ITW.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION

Tony LaMalfa

With strained yet still youthful anticipation, I place my poison-tipped pen upon another blank page—a veritable canvas virgin to the potentiality of those markings about to alter its existence. An unsuspecting quarry, it readily receives strokes made in hopes of stoking even an ember of suspense. What will I write today?

Once more, I petition for participation in a pastime which evokes bygone wisdom from an invisible, knowing force. And if I fan this ember enough to invite a generous conflagration, let it help me cope with that which I cannot know in absolute certainty. May it befriend we silent rogues who burn to create, nay, to *connect* with any so sympathetic a soul who might wander astray for a single thought, hour, or afternoon. What will I write today?

As my pen slashes at the pearl paper before me, I unwittingly surrender myself to desolate winds guiding dark nebulae past deep causeways of chaos, reaching places the conventional dare not trespass. I try to make sense of a world that breeds nightmares of the innocent and lifts the tarnished, silver veil of our imaginations so we might visit great vistas of fear and forgetfulness. But I am a lens to the camera focused on the flipside of life's lucky coin. On tragedy over comedy—the funeral, not the wedding. What will I write today?

Were I an instrument, I would surely sing a swansong worthy of the lowly oboe or haunted violin. However, therein lies my salvation, for I see beauty in madness and madness in beauty, like the bittersweet smell of gasoline or antiquity of autumn as another year passes. I am a writer of horror, and wearing a wicked smile of delight, I wonder again thusly:

What will I write today?

Tony LaMalfa's head wouldn't fit through the theatre door, so he gave up acting to teach Phys Ed. Although he enjoyed teaching, LaMalfa escaped the bureaucracy plaguing public education to pursue music, however. However, stage fright lurked behind the act curtain. Now, he turns dark imaginings into evocative tales for sheer pleasure. tonylamalfa.com.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

SOLITARY, NOT ALONE

Paul Lonardo

We write by ourselves

When it comes to mental health

You are not alone.

Paul Lonardo writes both fiction and nonfiction books. Most recently, *The Legend of Lake Incunabula*, an anthology of dark fantasy tales, was released in the spring of 2022. He studied filmmaking/screenwriting and earned a B.A. in English from the University of Rhode Island. He lives in Lincoln, RI with his wife and son.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

WHERE A MONSTER BELONGS

S. Alessandro Martinez

The monster. The alien. The creature. Whether it was in a book, movie, or video game, these were the characters I always gravitated toward. The others, the non-humans. Those who—even though they were sometimes on the side of Good—were different.

I wasn't diagnosed with Autism, depression, and anxiety until I was 22. Still, even without an official diagnosis, I knew there was something different about how my brain worked compared to "normal" people. Shy, quiet, weird, I was a constant outsider at school. My classmates loved to ask me the same questions over and over.

"Why are you so quiet?"

"Why are you always reading?"

"Why don't you ever say anything?"

"Why do you like that horror stuff?"

I only had one answer to all the questions: "That's just how I am." Not that I ever had the courage to say that to them. Being picked on only made me distance myself from these people and not want to be like them.

In fourth grade, I was lucky enough to form a friendship with two guys. They accepted me for who I was. However, when we went off to high school, and they both formed friendships with other kids, I didn't. Again, I was the loner when my friends weren't around. Still, the three of us remain friends to this day, and I couldn't imagine my life without them both.

Fast forward to me joining the HWA in 2016. Wow. I had never before met such a friendly group of people that so readily accepted me; that so quickly took me into the fold and made me feel not only welcome, but like I was truly a part of an entire community that *wanted* me there. A community that makes this outsider feel like he belongs.

Thank you.

S. Alessandro Martinez is a Bram Stoker Award® -nominated author of Mexican and Spanish descent, and a native Southern Californian with Autism/Asperger's who writes horror and fantasy for adults and children. His writings have appeared in several magazines and anthologies. *Helminth* is his debut novel.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

CRUMB

David Curfiss

It's hard to be a kid when the world around you is falling apart
The center of everything, yet a lonely heart
It's hard to be the soft observer, the parent, the controller
The center of a world that requires the young one to be so much older
Diapers, daycare, feeding everyone without sleep
Get up go to school, make the meals, can't be weak
It's not fun to be a child whose world wants him wiser
The baker of several cookies
A crumb with no riser

David Curfiss is a veteran of the U.S. Navy. His writings include “Michael’s Home” (a short story) and *A Thousand Miles to Nowhere* (a Post-Apocalypse Thriller). David mentors for the Horror Writers Association when he is not backpacking with his family or hiking New England Mountains in the rain.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE LAST STAND OF MR. NOBODY

Dale Fletcher

Years spent in darkness led to this moment of reckoning. The journey was long and filled with horrors, but worth each bloody step. Seemingly endless striving brought us to silence a voice that could never be redeemed.

Daggers gleam in Meg's hands and Scott grips his hammers. Amelia conjures her bear. I gather my words, feeling their power growing in my chest. After years wasted battling each other, we are united against the one who molded us from the clay of his self-indulgence: Mr. Nobody. In his mirrored suit, he stands defensive before the door.

"Don't go inside," he begs. "There lies only pain. Let me protect you."

"You have no power over us," I say, knowing his protection to be nothing but avoidance of terrible truths.

Knuckles crack, and a bass rumble emanates from the grizzly. As one, we charge, shrieking wordless battle cries. Mirrored glass shatters as we avenge ourselves against his deflections—those words no longer effective against us. When nothing remains but glittering powder, Meg kicks in the final door.

Within, there is only a lump of rock salt the size of twin fists. I cradle it in arms coated with sparkling dust and we turn to leave. Our quest requires one final act to seal victory.

Crumbling stone stairs, damp with moss, lead us down to the Alchemist. The formula is complex and requires something from each of us. There is loss and the promised pain.

In the end, we hold our heart, freed from its cage of hardened tears. There is agony in returning it to the void between our ribs. The others lend me strength, holding me tenderly within the cavern of my mind, weeping with me for the years lost and lessons learned.

Now we stand: a tiny army, bonded forever.

Dale Fletcher is a non-binary writer who draws inspiration from their struggles with mental health disorders. Living undiagnosed for decades led them to develop creative coping mechanisms, such as forming elaborate internalized worlds with villains and heroes. After submitting short works of fiction, they are working on their first novel.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE BULLFROG AND THE BLACK DOG

Marsheila Rockwell

The bullfrog sings, but never sleeps
The black dog came and stole his peace

Tore it away with jagged teeth
Spat it out like rotten meat

The dog stands guard should it come back
Forever ready to attack

To bury kindness in quicksand
And crush the helpfulest of hands

He wants the frog afraid, alone
To toy with like a well-chewed bone

He thinks the bullfrog will give in
Decide this fight is not for him

But he forgets the bullfrog's song
It has been there all along

Most days quiet, some days loud
The music still survives uncowed

It's part and parcel with the frog
It's always there, come frost or fog

The black dog stole his peace, it's true
But peace recedes like morning dew

The dog was foolish; stole the wrong thing
The tormented frog continues to sing

The black dog fears to hear that song
He knows its magic is too strong

He howls in pain; it fills his ears
It plays through smoke as he disappears

Marsheila (Marcy) Rockwell is an award-nominated tie-in author and poet as well as the author of multiple books, short stories, poems, and comics. She is a disabled pediatric cancer/mental health awareness advocate and a reconnecting Chippewa/Métis. She lives in the desert, buried under books. Find out more here: <https://marsheilarockwell.com/>.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

MOURNING THE MANUSCRIPT.

Lara Frater

November 1, 2016

I start *Stand Clear of the Closing Door* for NaNoWriMo. I finish in February.

All my life I struggled with anxiety, ADHD, and depression. It makes me tired, gives me brain fog, makes it harder to write, harder to find mistakes, and easier to make them. It takes longer to finish things. I have many unfinished manuscripts and finished ones I hate.

But I like *Stand Clear*.

October 17, 2018

I'm comfortable enough to post chapter 1 to my writer's group.

Stand Clear is about zombies and a flu epidemic that wipes out 80% of the population.

I always thought people overreacted and could be stupid. I remember one year this strong flu came from China and people here wouldn't go to Chinese restaurants. (Stand Clear, chapter 1)

March 1–December 31, 2019

I regularly post chapters and revise. I like this novel and plan to maybe self-publish next year. It's been 6 years since my last self-published novel.

March 11, 2020

I go to Chinatown because people avoid it.

March 13, 2020

I don't realize this is the last time I open the *Stand Clear* file.

March 27, 2020

I get the virus. I live three miles from the epicenter as the virus hits New York. People die in the streets and in their beds like my novel.

March 2020–?

I think about *Stand Clear*. Some say hold it, others say release it.

I try to be strong, but I can't. I know I write; numbers appear on my spreadsheet. I should submit because my last thing published is 2019.

But life is a blur.

August 2020

I take a chance and start sharing *Paranormal Pest Control*.

Today:

Paranormal Pest Control is with betas.

Stand Clear of the Closing Doors will have its day, one day.

And I am okay.

Lara Frater is an author and librarian who writes horror, sci-fic, non-fiction essays and poetry. She has published several short stories and poems as well as the zombie series, *End of the Line*, and the non-fiction book *Fat Chicks Rule*. She's currently working on a novel about demonic bugs.

<https://www.facebook.com/LaraFrater>



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

MY HANDS ARE NOT MY OWN

(A Poem of Dissociation)

Varian Ross

My hands move over the guitar,
yes I have years of practice, but these
hands are not mine. Scales pour from my
arching fingers, scales I don't know.
Now I wait to see if his teacher notices,
dread infuses me. I'm not the one he's teaching.
Sharing a body is difficult, but it was the only
avenue, the only escape from whatever shattered us.
Red words our host types, fingers flying. Their words
echo as they pour their feelings on to paper, we watch
now as they slip into a poem, and we are unsure who is
on the other side of this screen, whose fingers are on the keys.
They did not know of us for twenty years; that is how this works
Monster is what the world whispers, *violent killer in waiting*.
You reading these words, we have found hope in the darkest corners;
once we were told the darkness would hate us, but we've seen
whole years of time torn away by the light. Dark words give us
new words to explore, and a candle of hope to light.

Varian Ross is an author of horror fiction and poetry. They have been published with Ghost Orchid Press and Horror Tree. When not writing, they can be found knitting, playing guitar, and spending time with their family. Varian lives in the Midwestern United States. Varian's Twitter: <https://twitter.com/VarianRoss>



ESCAPING THE HORROR OF DISABILITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Brandon Ketchum

When you're diagnosed with a mental health disorder, the stigma can be overwhelming. Likewise, when dealing with a disability, there is plenty of stigma. The two often go hand-in-hand. Shame, pain, rage, isolation, disconnection, trauma, these are all symptoms and truths of the horror that many experience every day.

As a service-connected veteran, a person with diabetes, and someone who continued in athletics well beyond his sell-by date, I have dealt with my fair share of these horrors. I live in constant, low-level pain from many injuries and surgeries. I struggle to control my weight and blood sugar. I struggle with social issues from past emotional abuse. I have hearing loss. I have psychological issues that have gone undiagnosed and untreated as a result of my injuries and disease.

I should know better. I'm a mental health professional. I know many tricks of the trade, the coping strategies, the importance of support systems, the varied therapies, and treatments. I don't have to face the horrors of disability and mental illness alone, and neither should anyone else.

For those of you without the money, insurance, or access to care, there are programs available to assist you. For those veterans out there, contact your local VA. For those of you afraid of what others might think, the only thing you can do is do what's best for *you*. Those worthy in your life will support you; those unworthy will reveal themselves for who they are.

Though mental illness and disability can be scary, no one should have to live in a horror story. You are not alone. Help and support are available. Write and read horror. Don't live it.

Brandon Ketchum is a speculative fiction writer from Pittsburgh, PA who enjoys putting a weird spin or strange vibe into every story, dark or light. He is a member of SFWA and the Horror Writers Association, and his work has won Writers of the Future Contest honorable mentions.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

A CONFESSSIONAL: WHY I WILL NOT LEAVE THE HOUSE AND SPEND ALL MY TIME WRITING HORROR

Terrie Leigh Relf

It's not that I'm agoraphobic,
but I don't go out much anymore.
My team of doctors—a few psychiatrists—
claim the meds will help,
but I still can't walk out the door.
It's not that I'm allodoxaphobic,
since I do care what people think.
The news crews in their jeeps
and coptors search for stories,
so I close my eyes, refuse to blink.
It's not that I'm atephobic,
but have you gone outside, seen the ruin?
The virologists turned world leaders
say it'll take centuries to rebuild,
but in the meantime, what just blew in?!
What I am is blenno and bufonophobic
as it's raining frogs and giant toads,
their slimy tongues and bulbous bodies,
slither toward me through the door...
and you KNOW what this bodes!

Terrie Leigh Relf is an active member of the HWA, a lifetime member of the SFPA, and is on staff at Hiraeth Publishing and Tales from the Moonlit Path. You can learn more about her at the following websites: <https://terrieleighrelf.com/>; <https://tlrelf.wordpress.com/>; and <https://tlrelfreikipractitioner.wordpress.com/>.



THE RITUAL

Lu Kondor

The darkness exists. It's there all the time. Overwhelming and bottomless, it is like a betrayal of the mind. Each day is a hard one, starting in the early morning. Cold sweat trickles down, palms clammy. It is as if hands are pulling down on shoulders with all their might. The voices call over and over.

Deep breaths and sitting at the desk start the ritual. The chime of the machine is calming as it boots up. The soft glow of the salt lamp gives off a ginger-pink glimmer. Stars twinkle outside the window in the dawn sky, and an old raccoon wanders by. It sniffs the air and rambles off to do whatever business it is up to.

Fingers slide across the smooth worn keys on the laptop. Balm for the soul. Writing is the ritual that stops the darkness. It calms the way nothing else can. The sunrise after a long night. Writing clears the mind, letting the characters' voices tell their stories. Those voices flow out of my hands onto the screen, sometimes scary, sometimes thrilling. They face demons and creatures with as much courage as they can. Most of all, they are characters just like me, with flaws and strengths, aspirations and apathy, sadness and hopefulness.

Lu Kondor is a writer living in Los Angeles by way of New York City. Her love of reading was nurtured by time spent between the book stacks at Wesleyan University's Olin Library and various collections at Yale. Lu studied writing at UCLA and is a James Kirkwood Literary Prize nominee.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

WAIT WHEN ICE FORMS OVER MY FINGERTIPS

Marisca Pichette

like acrylic nails,
biting through skin and overwhelming
my eyes

my heart isn't strong—it never was—
and I saw the novae exploding across
your face and I wanted their fire

I dreamt of stardust and murder;
your lips like a coffin seal out the
enemy of life and they
stop and never stop
but I want to see them start

oh just once let me start
let me talk when I know I can't
and I know my teeth are shifting
and my gums bleed every night
but it's okay because you're permeable
and we can feel together and
you bleed beneath me and I scream

yes because we did it and it hurt
but scars tell us where we were
and I was and
you were too.

I wear my scars with pride
because getting this far—
it hurts.

Marisca Pichette writes about monsters and possibility. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Apparition Lit*, *Uncharted Magazine*, and *PseudoPod*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from Android Press in Spring 2023. She is on Twitter as @MariscaPichette.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

BANISHING THE DARKNESS

David Sharp

In the spring of 2005, I found myself lost in my thirties. I wanted to forget and relive my thought-to-be, fading youth and became careless. Life swirled around in an eddy. I made mistakes. I quit taking my meds and had a scare with a sudden bout of pneumonia and was hospitalized for a month. I thought I was going to die, but life went on. I was released and sent home, all alone, and I was so weak that it took a lot to get up off the couch.

The darkness of depression crept in with ghosts of the past. Fever dreams of angels and demons came to me. Thoughts of deserving my fate drove nails into my soul. It was mentally hard to break out of the doldrums, but I knew that I needed to focus on being better, on being well, so I turned to writing as an escape.

In my delirium, I wrote pieces of fiction tinged with horror. The stories transported me from the harsh reality of the dire moment and offered an escape by way of a pen and a notebook. I had written some before, but this time felt different. The stories were rough and imperfect, yet some mystical alchemy happened in writing them down. Feelings of fear and rage were settled in ink with newfound serenity. Writing changed me and saved me from my own personal abyss. I started a journey then—one I have been on ever since—one of discovery of light through horror, and I have banished the darkness.

David Sharp is a writer who grew up identifying with the outsider from his teenage punk years onward. His horror works include *Anarchy: Strange Tales of Outsiders*, *Escape from Dolphin Street*, *Under the Moonbow*—which granted him membership in HWA—and the upcoming *Modulator*. www.davidsharpwriter.com



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

EVICTIION NOTICE

Fleur Bradley

THIS SERVES AS A NOTICE.

I see you there across the room, looking smug and stretching your legs. You have a whole posse with you, but they exist in shadows and speak in murmurs. Your voice is loudest inside her beautiful mind. You're the leader of the pack.

You whisper, talk, sometimes scream in her ear. Telling her she's

Stupid

Worthless

Ugly

Your friends chime in, but it's you who takes the air out of the room.

And lately, you've started taking over. That's when we got to talking (you doing most of it, me listening). Your words shatter the window to her kind soul, sending shards in my face. Sharp glass cutting through my girl's skin from the inside out. And then you take a breath, sucking those same shards back, ripping her flesh.

Here we are again, you screaming, her trapped inside. The meds do little, which you're gloating about.

Can't shut me up.

I wait for you to crawl back to your corner. She's afraid to move, because of all that broken glass, inside and out.

We bandage the cuts, knowing you'll be back tomorrow. She sleeps now, while I sweep up the glass and tape the broken window.

You aren't wanted here, with your baseball bat of hateful words, your knife of loathing. Get out.

I wish I could fight you, but it's not my battle to win. But I watch her get stronger. Her new window will be made of plexiglass. Her heart a mother.

I see you there, across the room, with your posse. You've been served your eviction notice. She'll win the next fight.

WITH THIS NOTICE, YOU ARE EVICTED FROM THE PREMISES.

Fleur Bradley is the author of many short horror and mystery stories as well as horror books for YA and MG, including *Midnight at the Barclay Hotel* and *Daybreak on Raven Island* (Viking). Originally from the Netherlands, she lives in Colorado with her family and entirely too many rescue pets.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

BUKOWSKI'S BROKEN SHOELACE THEORY

Timothy P. Flynn

The news headline read: *Wife stabbed husband multiple times over taste of coffee*. You don't need to be a writer of horror to interpret that a vital piece of information is missing here: backstory.

My writing mind reacted that what we don't hear about is the build-up. Could adultery, mental or physical abuse, or undiagnosed issues be a factor? The human mind can only endure so much sadness, pressure, or trauma. Before you know it, the smallest trivial event or misinterpretation can make you snap.

Bukowski's Shoelace poem describes the persistent, nagging nuisances of daily life, but it's the simplest thing that drives us mad—a broken shoelace. When you factor in mental illness, those daily inconveniences can take a significant toll. I have struggled for years with depression, alcoholism, and severe anxiety and can attest it makes the simple act of waking to a new day unbearable.

What needs to be addressed is the location of resources for mental illness. This Initiative's goal is to guide those in the darkness, and to point the way. If someone is struggling with mental illness, we as a community of creators can provide hope with our words.

There is a light in that darkness that suffocates those afflicted with mental illness. I sought treatment, and this April 22nd, 2022, was my 14th year of sobriety. My depression and anxiety are constant, but I can handle it better with hope and my writing. We may bump into each other in that darkness, so take my hand. I'll help you reach that light. We got this.

Timothy P. Flynn is a poet from Massachusetts. His poetry resides in *Wicked Tales*, *Wicked Creatures*, *Scifaikuest*, and the *HWA Poetry Showcase Vol 5 & Vol 6*. He's a member of the New England Horror Writers, Affiliate member of the HWA, and recipient of the 2021 HWA Dark Poetry Scholarship.



DON'T CALL ME CRAZY

Cindy O'Quinn & Wicker Stone

Alrighty then—here we go. Breathe in that mountain air.
Take one teaspoon when your mind feels stuck.
You know the feeling, but it's hard to bear.

This is where I get off, my stop.
Let me know how things work out.
Give me a call if you start drooling at the chops.

Wipe that look of despair off of your face.
If it happens, we'll deal with it.
I'll give you a quarter ounce of brown. It'll set the pace.

How's it going? Feel the need to bleed?
You tell me, I saw my ghost float by and give me the finger.
Oh my! Haunted flowers on scarred amber. Could be you're unwell.

Don't go dirty and deep in cement mucks.
I'll give you a bit extra of the good stuff.
Oops! I think you took too much.

Bloody hell! You're dancing along the edge of a wicked mind.
What's that mean? Am I going to die?
It means you're mind-sick, and that's the worst kind.

Like stardust as you puke marshmallow fields and buttercups. Don't be scared. Suck it up!

You'll have to ride the blues, and swallow the greens to forget.
Take enough and no one will ever notice.
That's what you said as you laughed at my mental upset.

Don't you know by now it's not a dream?
Place your bet on red, and roll the dice like your eyes.
Iris disappear into your brain hole, along with bloody extremes.

Do you remember me now? You worthless fu*k!
Your brain-eating mind sickness is almost up.
You called me Crazy. You're out of both time and luck.

No, I've given you nothing but opinions,
you filled in the gaps on your own.
Just goes to show the power of words when you're feeling nothing but alone.

Cindy O'Quinn is a four-time HWA Bram Stoker Award-nominated writer. Born and raised in the mountains of West Virginia, now living and writing on the old Tessier Homestead in northern Maine. **Wicker Stone** is a writer of everything horror. He lives in beautiful southern Maine.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE ART OF HEALING

Christina Sng

I.

I learned many truths
After the life I knew ended.

After my father died,
After those I loved lied.

A small flame lit up
And unmasked the truth.

Inside the glimmer of lies,
Through the fog of night.

My life was an illusion,
Built to control and imprison.

II.

I learned that
Unconditional love

Should be real
And unflinching,

Once it exists, it is eternal,
Even after dying.

It's a living flame
That burns forever,

Charging those who love
With new power.

III.

I also learned
That evil is real,

Disguised as love,
Disguised as a soul mate,

Packaged in a pretty box

With a ribbon on top.

But if you open it,
It will throw acid in your face

Over and over
Till you stop feeling it.

IV.

We can only heal
When we are free of it,

Physically, emotionally,
Mentally.

When our brains
Revert to normality.

That's when the grief sets in,
Over the long, wasted years

And the unwitting souls
Destroyed by this.

V.

How do we heal?
How do we mend?

Be gentle with ourselves,
Treat us how we treated them.

Spoil ourselves.
We deserve it.

Be true to who we are.
Be patient. Be empathetic.

Look out for the red flags
And burn them.

VI.

Keep company with
Only those with integrity.

Cast away the cruel.
Keep only

The good, the kind,
And the true.

You cannot heal
With thorns

Constantly
Cutting you.

VII.

So build a boundary wall
With tall electric fences.

When you see
Those warning flags

Closing the distance,
Turn on your fence

And remind yourself
“I am safe now,”

As your fence
Crackles and burns.

Christina Sng is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, and *Tortured Willows*. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, including *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *Penumbra*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE MONSTER INSIDE

John Lane

I faced cannibalistic aliens and witches, a ghostly beagle to see his COVID-ridden owner on his deathbed, enough hyenas to tear a man to pieces, a vampire that disguised a weight loss program as a recruitment tool for minions, all from the keys of a Hewlett Packard laptop. But the monster I face the most hides in the darkest corners of my mind, waiting for the right moment to speak in phrases of “you’re not loved” or “you can’t write” or even “you’re nothing”. When I feel the weight spewed by my own personal demon’s mental garbage, I remember those special little moments, like getting myself out of bed, looking myself in the mirror and telling myself that I am somebody, seeing my wife’s beaming face, going to work for another day’s pay, and with the hope I receive, for at least one more day, I silence the monster inside.

But the monster still waits for another day.

John Lane's fiction has appeared in *Page & Spine*, Black Hare Press, 101 Words, Ghost Orchid Press, Boston Literary Magazine, and other venues. *The 81 Words Flash Fiction Anthology*, which includes John's short-short fiction, "The Visit," received the 2022 Saboteur Award for Best Anthology. Army and National Guard veteran.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

YOUR STORY

E.S. Magill

Words build worlds, forge relationships, express ideas, and create stories, perhaps humankind's greatest achievement. For most of my life my mind fed me a story I believed everyone shared—one where darkness reigned, and despair was commonplace. Until the day a friend told me a shocking story: everyone did not suffer from depression and anxiety.

My friend's words sent me seeking help. Within me existed an intrusive narrator, controlling my story, one who favored flashbacks of past pains. I read everything on Zen Buddhism to teach me only now existed. This intrusive narrator enjoyed flashforwards too, creating dread at every turn. I used journaling and talk therapy to anchor me to the present. Diet, vitamins, self-hypnosis, I explored every tool to gain control of the narrative.

In my quest, I learned how narrative affects the mind. From a very young age, I naturally used books and film to live the stories of others, which alleviated the symptoms plaguing me. While I read all genres, I gravitated to horror. Monsters and murderers served as metaphors for the malady within my mind. In horror, protagonists encounter evil and peril—sometimes prevailing, sometimes succumbing. In either case, the story always had a moral. From wailing ghosts to shambling zombies, horror brings on a rush of neurotransmitters, providing relief from the twin demons of depression and anxiety. As horror enthusiast turned writer, penning scary stories has proven to be just as therapeutic.

Recently, through Ketamine Infusion Therapy, the intrusive narrator in my head may be shut down forever. For the first time, I might be the sole author of my story.

Mental illness doesn't need to control your narrative. Seek help from trusted professionals and positive solutions. Many more supports and solutions exist today. Try them. It's time to write your own story.

E.S. Magill has edited the anthologies, *Haunted Mansion Project Year One* and *Deep Cuts*. She writes short stories, novels, nonfiction, and was the Reviews Editor for *Dark Wisdom* magazine. Recently retired from teaching middle school English, she now spends her days writing and binging all things horror. Visit www.esmagill.com.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

THE INSIDIOUS STALKER

Colleen Anderson

Depression stalks us as a creepy clown *and* as a masked slasher. Being depressed is like being in a glass jar. You can see the world, but you can't climb out and no one hears you.

Two years before the pandemic locked us into isolation, two family deaths, a pet's death, two broken limbs, an eviction, a layoff, and a car crash hammered me to the ground. Every time I thought I could stand up, grief gut punched me. I was afraid I'd never write again. I had no energy to do anything but cry.

When my brother died, everything stopped. End of the world? Why yes. Pandemic? Yes, like everyone. I became a ghost locked in 24-7 with myself; no one saw me. What did it matter if I existed if I was absent from the world? These feelings intensified as I wept nightly. People don't always understand what depression is. The depressed don't feel they can reach through that glass cylinder to ask for help.

To survive, I channeled grief and depression through writing various poetic forms.

Divinity in the Afterglow

There are shadows of angels
All metal struts and bones
How they fly, I don't know
When made of earthy ores
But then they are only shades
The ghosts of what was before
Perhaps that's the reason angels came to be

If that's the case
 then this atomic blast
Has sent us all to heaven

Supplications fall as ashen powder
Drift over bodies shrouded grey
Angels do not reply, uncaring or unreal
Pleas distill through sirens, screams
The agony of the world devoid

It is only in this final moment
as flesh melts and bones burn
 that I see forms aglow

The incandescent dreams of angels
Carries me on flaming wings

Space and Time #137, 2020

Colleen Anderson's writing has appeared in five countries in such venues as nEvermore!, Shadow Atlas, Amazing, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly and Cemetery Dance. She is a multiple award nominee. Her poetry collection, I Dreamed a World is available from LVP Publications, and fiction, A Body of Work (Black Shuck Books) online.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

DO NOT GO GENTLE: LIVING WITH DEPRESSION

Naching T. Kassa

I have lived with depression for over 24 years. It began on Friday, June 26, 1998, when my mom passed away due to breast cancer. It was the first time I ever felt true despair.

Years passed, and I began to notice the telltale symptoms of oncoming bouts of depression. Any kind of stress would thrust me into it. Sometimes, it was so bad, I experienced suicidal thoughts.

Everyone has a different experience with their own mental illness. In my case, I felt imprisoned by it. Like I was drowning and couldn't pull myself out. When I did come out of an episode, I felt as though I had just gotten over a cold. As though it were something physical as well as mental.

So, what gets me through it? I've never felt the need to take any substance to treat my depression, so I've had to find other ways to battle it. One of those ways is writing horror.

Writing horror is cathartic. Not only does it help me work through an episode, my writing can also be used to help others. Horror stories are human stories. Through them, others can understand that their feelings are valid. Edgar Allan Poe's stories are a great example of this. He knows how I feel. He knows the loss, the fear, the anguish. And, though his stories don't always end on a hopeful note, mine do. I want to convey to the reader that there is a reason to keep fighting.

Dylan Thomas wrote a poem about death, which I think also applies to depression. These are my favorite lines: "Do not go gentle into that good night... Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

You keep fighting. I'm right there with you.

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She serves as an assistant at Crystal Lake Publishing and is a proud member of both the Mystery Writers of America and The Horror Writers Association.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

INVITATION TO THE STAGE

Harmony Heart

Congratulations! You have been chosen to participate in the Stage.

What is the Stage?

- The Stage is an ongoing role-play with 8 billion players.
- The Stage provides a Role for each person to assume.
- All Roles are final.
- Roles require you follow the expectations of the following characteristics: gender, economic class, religion, sexual orientation, sexual expression, race, cognitive ability, physical ability, and more.

The following are not possible in the Stage:

- Psychological Harm: You should not be experiencing harm from fulfilling Roles. They are for your own good.
- Role Alteration: Deviation from Roles leads to discomfort in our Premium Players. Catering to our Premium Players is a necessity and deviations from your Role will not be tolerated.
- Special Accommodations: No one in any Role should require accommodations beyond the norm. Our studies funded by Premium Players indicate that accommodations are attempts to undermine the Stage.
- Role Inequality: There is no inequality amongst any two Roles. All Players are equal. Talk of inequality is not allowed.

The psychological benefits of fulfilling assigned Roles:

- Internal Quietude: Your thoughts will be quieter.
- No More Questions: You won't ask questions.
- More Time with Family: Your family will accept you back.

Consider the words of wisdom from the Stage's founders:

- “Ambiguity is the enemy of peace.”
- “If we all accept our Roles as right, who is to say we are wrong?”
- “The Stage will continue as long as everyone plays their part.”

Answers to questions you submitted:

- There is no “outside the stage.”
- There are no “former Players.”
- There are no “communities without the stage.”

Next Steps:

- Your questions indicate guidance is needed.
- A Role Enforcer will be sent to your home shortly.
- Do not resist them. They are there to help.

Harmony Heart is a neurodivergent plural latinx trans woman from Texas. Harmony's stories focus on queer culture, mental illness, and challenges faced by marginalized groups. She has spent the last eleven years deconstructing a series of strange events which became the inspiration for her novel in-progress.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

CURSED

Mercedes M. Yardley

I come from a long, rich history of mental illness. It was only spoken of in whispers, in hisses, passed down from female to female because we seemed to experience the worst. Great grandmother died in the asylum. Grandma had shock treatments so severe that she couldn't remember her children. My father and his siblings became used to being called by the wrong name, if my grandmother recalled a name at all.

I took the plunge and started on medication, which felt shameful. It saved my life. Gradually my aunt and cousins opened up about our history. We sit around a virtual table discussing The Big Secret, the Dark Family Curse. We throw our cards down and find that we have depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and suicidal ideation. We talk about pricing our medication while pricing caskets. Frugality has saved us more than once.

But do you know what else we are? We're family. We have the same eyes and some of us have pink and blue hair. We are psychologists. We are cartoonists. We are writers and mothers and fathers. We are basketball players and elders in our church. We roller derby. We kickbox. We have pets who think we're their world. We do good things for society. We volunteer, and march politically, and render aid to those who need it. And although of course we cry, we laugh and laugh and laugh.

Things are different than a generation ago. By speaking up, I'm hoping to help erase the stigma of mental health. It shouldn't be a secret, and there should be no shame. It's simply one aspect to an intricate, multi-faceted individual. It isn't who we are. It doesn't make us less. It makes us compassionate and strong, worthwhile and powerful.

Mercedes M. Yardley is a dark fantasist who wears poisonous flowers in her hair. She is the author of *Beautiful Sorrows*, *Apocalyptic Montessa* and *Nuclear Lulu*, *Pretty Little Dead Girls*, *Darling*, and won the Bram Stoker Award for *Little Dead Red*. You can find her at mercedesmyardley.com.



HWA MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE
