

THIS IS HORROR

WHAT IS HORROR?

FEATURING:

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2012

A COLLECTION OF FICTION, NON-FICTION AND ART.

What is horror?

Edited by Michael Wilson



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Editorial

Michael Wilson

I WANTED TO offer you a gift with real substance, as a thank you for all your support, which is why I decided to create *What is horror?* Within the next thirty-plus pages we investigate this age-old question through fiction, art and non-fiction. From the grotesque ‘Black violet’ by Vincent Sammy to the humorous and flamboyantly brutal ‘Taking the piss’ by Jasper Bark there really is something for everyone.

Indulge yourself in a showcase of original horror from some of the best in the business. And if you like what you see please stick around at ThisIsHorror.co.uk – our flash fiction will appeal to those who love chilling and beautifully illustrated fiction, whilst our featured interviews are sure to strike the right chord with those who like to dig a little deeper. If you love what we do, why not consider subscribing to our Premium Chapbooks?

Horror is alive and well, my friends. But don’t take my word for it, come inside and experience. What is horror? *This* is horror.

What is horror?

Joseph D’Lacey

ONE OF HORROR’S faces – just one of the many – arises from the inevitability of darkness in a human life; superficially, the darkness when the sun goes down or we turn out the light at bedtime but, at deeper levels, the darkness in our own psyches; that potential for us to break down or transgress. Fundamentally, it is born from the darkness of that ultimate unknown: the gate of mortality.

This aspect of horror allows us to journey into night; to prepare, in waking, for dreams and in life for what may follow it. This invaluable facet of horror is nothing to do with genre. It is a gift which permits us to tread that dark path none of us wish to travel but the one we must all, eventually, take: the final road into darkness that will mark our severance from everything familiar and our leap into the void.

In short, horror is practise for death.

It won't be long now

Gary McMahon

PLEASE, HAVE ANOTHER drink. Could you pour me one while you're at it?
Thank you.

So. How do you feel?

Good, good...

Did you get much sleep last night?

Well, yes, I suppose you were anxious.

And the money? Everything went okay with the electronic transfer?

That's good. We're all ready, then. Ready to go.

It won't be long now. I'm sure. Don't be nervous. I'm not. I'm more than ready for this. I've been preparing for a long time. Preparing mentally. I've made my peace. I hope you can do the same.

Mmm... lovely. I will miss this, though. Good whisky. I won't miss much else, I don't think.

(pause)

Apropos of nothing, I remember when I was a small child. We used to have family holidays by the sea. Even my father used to come along, if he wasn't too busy. I always loved the coast... that sense of hugeness. The sea doesn't judge. It doesn't remember. It just is.

Do you know what I mean?

Perhaps not.

I'm sorry. I'm rambling. It's the excitement, you see, the thought of so much preparation finally paying off. Maybe I shouldn't have had another drink after all. I want to be sober during this. I want to savour each and every second. It isn't every day that something like this happens. It is – if you'll forgive the bad pun – a real once-in-a-lifetime experience.

(pause)

Those? Yes, they're the... tools. The apparatus. Don't worry. They'll show you when they get here. Everything will be explained. I'm sure you recognise some of them – you had medical training in your home country, didn't you? You were some kind of doctor?

That's why your name was on the list.

Those other items on the table...well, they might look a bit strange, but I assure you they're 'fit-for-task'. They've been designed specifically for the job.

(pause)

I hope you have steady hands.

A surgeon? Were you really? Well, that's good. My people must've done their research well. As a surgeon, you should be able to appreciate all

of this. I'm sure you have a full understanding of the nature of pain, too, and how to control it.

Yes, yes... I know doctors are meant to value the sanctity of life, but, in a way, that's what this is all about. The sanctity of life... and how by defiling it we can create an entertainment.

I know. I know you don't approve... and, truly, I'm sorry about that.

Excuse me? The camera? Yes, they're bringing all that gear with them. It's all digital now. Nothing to set up: just point-and-press technology. Natural lighting. Sound recording is built into the camera. All very clever stuff, not like the old days when we had to spend hours prepping for a shoot. I suppose I'm seeing it all from the other side now, a different angle. Rather than organising everything behind the camera, I'm the star of the show.

(pause)

Well. Isn't this cosy? I'm glad I had the chance to get to know you a little before, well, before it's done. Before you do it.

(pause)

Your family... they're glad of the money, yes? I suppose it means a lot to them – to their lives, where they live. Africa, isn't it?

Ah, yes. I've read about that place in the papers... civil war, drought, disease. I'm not surprised you needed to send them money. I'm glad I could help them get out of that mess. Please, send them my regards when you see them. And treasure them... life's too short not to cherish the ones we love.

Believe me, I know.

The world is experiencing terrible times, times of great change and austerity. Each man must do what he must to put bread on the table. I'm right, aren't I? And during such times, businesses like mine will continue to flourish. It's not something I'm proud of – it's simply an economic fact.

Indeed, in times gone by, people like your family would've been the ones here, in my place. But these days our customers have more... sophisticated tastes. Can I even call it that? Sophisticated? It doesn't seem right somehow. Perhaps 'esoteric' would be a more appropriate choice of word.

(pause)

The market has changed. Viewing tastes have altered and become more radical, less predictable. In the past, it was all about blood and sex, but now they don't seem to want that. It's passé.

The current trend seems to involve intense anatomical exploration... hence the need for someone like you, with your background in medicine.

A surgeon, no less...

(pause)

It's difficult to guess the next thing they'll want to see, but we're expecting this to be what is usually called a game-changer.

(pause)

I'm sorry, what did you say?

Oh, yes, there is that. The guilt... but don't feel guilty afterwards, not on my behalf. I assure you I want this. I want it very much. The last thing I need is to... linger. I always said I'd rather go out this way, providing a service to my customers.

This Is Horror – It won't be long now by Gary McMahon

Like I said before, I've been preparing for this. It isn't just something I decided on spur of the moment. I suppose it was my intention all along, once I found out I was dying.

Excuse me. That's just my phone. A text message.

(pause)

Yes, they're on their way.

It won't be long now. Not long at all.

What is horror?

Mark West

IN ITS BROADEST sense, horror is a genre that I love, a genre that can be all things to all people, a genre that can run the gamut from the sickest splatterfests to the most moving of dramas. It's certainly a broad church and, at its best, produces some of the richest, most resonant work in the creative fields.

I'm a horror fan of every stripe – I read it, I watch it, I listen to the soundtracks and I write within it. As a writer, I love the fact that I can be as gory as I like with one story, whilst making the next a quiet and supernatural piece, I like that I can write a black comedy whilst the next tale is as bleak as hell.

Horror allows us to explore the human condition in ways that other, non-fantastical genres can't – we can go to the darkest places of love and loss and death and life, soak up what we see and then take it all one step beyond. We can examine the death of a loved one, the wreck of a life, the destruction of peace and sanity, yet put a face on it, a monster that both scares us and removes us slightly to examine the real truth behind the experience.

Horror is the feeling you get when something isn't right, when alarm bells ring that only you can hear, when the hairs stand up on the back of your neck, when your scalp gets all prickly and it can show you the beast. Personally, I'm not a

big fan of zombies but look at what a rich area that trope of the genre can be – it's not really about monsters eating your brains, of course it isn't, it's about people surviving an apocalypse (or, at the very least, the collapse of a civilised world) and how they deal with it. You can't do that in a light romance...

Horror has nurtured me – reading, writing and watching – for decades and hopefully it will do so for decades to come.

Long live Horror!

Long live This Is Horror.

Fetch by Manon Delacroix



What is horror?

Jasper Bark

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN as much a humorist as I am a horror writer, as steeped in satire as the sensational and the sadistic. For me both genres are simply different shades of the same spectrum, both are looking for a visceral reaction and both are looked down upon by the high arts. What is horror to me? It's the moment when the humour turns jet black, when the knowing laugh catches in the throat and becomes a scream, when the joke is suddenly on the reader.

The story I've written for this eBook will hopefully illustrate just what I mean.

Taking the piss

Jasper Bark

SO I'M TAKING A slash in the King's Arms. The two blokes either side of me finish up then leave as I'm shaking the last drops off. I'm all alone.

I check the door, then crouch down in front of the urinal. It's one of those big stainless steel jobs, with a long trough at the bottom. I get right up close to the sluice, where all the piss runs, and I whisper: "Danny, I know you can hear me."

I know what you're thinking, but I'm not touched or nothing. I just hate Danny Taylor. He's always been a nasty streak of piss. One of those useless thugs whose lips have been glued to a crack pipe since they were fifteen.

Danny didn't have no Dad around when he grew up see. That's 'cause his dad, Charlie, topped himself. Walked into his garage one night and started up his prize BMW. He loved that car more than his family. There was only one person Charlie loved as much as his car and that was Charlene, his bit on the side. But Charlene got tired of his shit and left him.

So Charlie got tired of life. He started up the engine and instead of getting a hose and sitting in the front seat, he went round the back of the car and put his mouth straight over the exhaust. Like he was blowing his prize possession. The

pipe was so hot it melted his lips, fused them to the exhaust. He was a terrible colour when they found him several hours later. His lips glued to the pipe.

Charlene didn't go to the funeral, but she wore black for a week as a mark of respect. She's nice like that is Charlene. She just can't take men too seriously. That's why she can't stay committed to one. They've never been there for her so why should she be there for them. That's what she told me when she dumped me.

I fucked her for a while after Charlie died. Nothing serious, but I had lot of fun and I was sorry when it ended. I was in her kitchen when she told me. She was wearing this long baggy top, not one of her usual tight, low cut jumpers.

Maybe she was trying to make herself look less attractive so she could get rid of me. Or maybe she was hiding something. I don't know. But nine months later Stevie was born. Terrible shame about that kid, terrible shame.

The stench of the urinal brings me back from the memories. "Danny," I say. "No one can hear you mate, they think it's just the pipes."

I know a lot about the pipes in the King's Arms. I did a job for the landlord a few months back. The urinal was playing up. The sluice was backed up and the piss was spilling out of the trough onto the customer's shoes. So he got me to look at it.

Turns out there's a little crawlspace right behind the wall where the urinal hangs. That's where all the pipes are. I had to go through the yard at the back and knock through the outside wall to get to it, so I could clear the blockage.

Only two feet wide it was. Working in there reminded me of being in solitary. I did a bit of bird when I was a youngster, for fighting mainly. Thumped a guard when I was inside and ended up in the hole. Wasn't too different from that crawlspace, except it smelled better, even with all the dead rats.

That was the funny thing about the crawlspace. I think it was something to do with the air circulation or whatever, but all the rats were perfectly preserved, like mummies. Some of them must've been there for decades as well, but not one of them stunk.

I cleaned them all out when I cleaned out the sluice pipe. You wouldn't believe the shit I found in there. Great clumps of slimy pubes and other stuff you can't imagine, like a glass eye and a tiny baby doll's arm. No shit, a baby doll's arm, don't ask me how that got there.

I look at the sluice at the end of the trough and try to imagine how it would fit through the little round grate. "You shouldn't have done that to Stevie," I say. "You realise that don't you Danny?"

Danny had persecuted Stevie his whole life. Maybe because of who Stevie's mother was. Or maybe because of the way he was born. He wasn't like other kids. His left arm was stunted and never grew. It remained the size of a baby's arm. Plus he had this weird lazy eye that used to go all the over the place when you were talking to him. Made it difficult to look him in the face. It also made him a target for little cunts like Danny Taylor.

I tried to help him when I could but there's not a lot you can do when it's kiddie violence. If you cuff them round the ear you're likely to end up back in stir these days. Plus I wasn't around that much. All the same I did feel a bit responsible. Like I said, Stevie was born about nine months after me and Charlene split up, and even though Charlene had a lot of fellers, I've always had my suspicions.

The whole thing between Danny and Stevie came to a head about a week after I'd finished the job at the King's Arms. Stevie walked into the men's room and saw Danny at the urinal. He must have been scared, but fair play to him, he stepped up right next to Danny.

I'm not certain exactly what happened next. Maybe it was Stevie's arm, or maybe he'd had a few and couldn't handle it. Perhaps it was his sense of humour, but he ends up pissing all over Danny's shoes.

Danny was having none of that. So he took Stevie round the back of the King's Arms and did a number on him. Dragged him outside by his little arm. Stevie was howling with the pain as Danny damn near wrenched it off. Then he punched Stevie to the ground and started kicking him. Stevie lay there crying and saying sorry but Danny wouldn't listen.

He kicked all of Stevie's front teeth out. Then he put his foot so hard into the back of Stevie's head that his lazy eyeball popped out.

While Stevie lay there on the ground, in a pool of his own blood and piss, screaming for his mother, Danny stamped on the eyeball. Laughed as it popped open under his Nikes and ground it into the tarmac. When he was done, he pulled out his cock and pissed into Stevie's open eye socket. Then he went back inside and finished his pint. It was an hour before someone thought to call an ambulance.

The police asked around a bit afterwards, but no one round here talks to them and their heart wasn't in it. My heart was. I can feel it pounding as I crouch next to the urinal.

"You didn't think I'd let you get away with it did you Danny?" I whisper. "There are some things you just can't walk away from."

He did think he'd walked away from it though, and he bragged about it to anyone who'd listen. I heard him one night down the King's Arms. Standing at the bar he was, proud as fucking punch, telling everyone how Stevie had it coming. "Taking the piss he was," that's what Danny said. Can you believe that? He reckoned Stevie was 'taking the piss'.

So I went home and got a hammer, a chisel and some super glue. Then I waited for Danny to leave the pub. Caught him on his way home. He was full of beer and soft as shit. Putting him down was a piece of piss, I'm not a defenceless wee lad like Stevie.

Then I went to work with the hammer and chisel. Not like you're thinking. I did take out Danny's front teeth, but that was later. First I went at those bricks I'd laid in the pub's outside wall. Shame really, I'd done a bang up job on them, but I made good when I was done and you'd never know I opened that crawlspace again.

That's where I left Danny, lying on his side with his wrists and ankles bound. That's where I used the superglue.

"You know what Danny?" I whisper, keeping an eye on the door in case someone comes in. "I read somewhere that the human body can survive for up to two months if it has a regular supply of liquids."

I picture him lying there, just like his dad, with his lips glued to a pipe. But unlike his Dad he'll take a long time to die. Cos Danny's lips aren't glued to an exhaust pipe they're glued to the sluice pipe from the urinal.

"Taking the piss Danny, that's what you said about little Stevie, do you remember? But now you know what it's really like to 'take the piss'."

What is horror?

Simon Kurt Unsworth

THIS IS HORROR; this thing right now. This not knowing what's ahead of us, and not understanding what's behind. This uncertainty.

Am I a good man? A bad one? I used to think I knew, but I don't, not any more. I used to have faith in the future, but I don't, not any more. I used to think and be happy, but now I think and I'm miserable. I used to look outwards and wonder, now I look inwards and seethe. I used to think the world made sense and now I don't. I used to know what to do, and now I don't.

Ask me what is horror, and I have to say: it's this.

The black violet by Vincent Sammy



What is horror?

Stephen Graham Jones

HORROR ISN'T PATIENT, horror isn't kind. Horror doesn't delight in evil, like people always want to think. There's more hope in horror than in most anywhere else. It's just hard-earned. In spite of the demons and gore and transgressive acts and distasteful imagery, horror's still the realest genre going. What it taps into each time out, when it's done right, is that certainty we've evolved with, that there's things in the shadows that want to eat us, and slowly. The response horror provokes in us is visceral, is undeniable. It changes our behaviour – makes us turn the lights out in a certain order, before bed. It makes us close that closet door all the way, tonight. It makes us hold our loved ones that much closer, and look over their shoulder, at whatever's coming next, be it from the sky or the street or the way the neighbour's looking back at you. Where there are tongues, horror will leave stumps. Where there is knowledge, horror will carve it in with steel, so you never forget. And where there are shadows, horror will live. And there will always be shadows.

Trick

Thana Niveau

OCTOBER. SEASON OF the witch. All Hallow's Eve. I stand behind the door, listening. Watching through the peephole. I hear the leaves rustling outside, scratching at the walls, peeking in the window. The wind tickles my bare feet as it sneaks in under the door. Invisible violation. I try to keep it out, try to keep it all out. I stuff newspapers in the cracks, but still this invasion.

My withered hands shake as I finally manage to prise the top off the bottle of tablets and swallow one without water. Child-proof. It's always about them.

I hear the children outside in their morbid gaiety. Laughing in their dark fantasy world of playful horror. Fun to shock and terrorise. Once a year, they have their way with the rest of us. And in return, fate has its way with them. Razors in candy, poison apples. Hansel and Gretel never learn.

Flash of light behind my eyes. Was I sleeping? Can't sleep through my vigil. There is a zombie on the other side of my door. Only inches of space between us.

Knocking. Ringing the bell. Darkness on my porch, keeping most of them away. But every year they grow more and more fearless. Like cockroaches. Fish

eyes meet mine through the glass tunnel of the peephole, but don't see me. The zombie shuffles off.

I sigh with relief, wilting. My bones are beginning to ache now. The chill is merciless, sending shards of pain through my body. There's the white-hot flash again. More tricks. No apples here, not any more. But tricks. They love their tricks and I love mine.

More voices, coming closer. This time it's a throng of white-faced clowns. Garish, terrifying. They pass by on the street, not stopping at the darkened house. Good. Keep going.

How long have I been standing here? My feet are numb from the exertion and the incessant chill forcing its way under the door.

I'm too afraid to look at the clock. All I can do is stare outside. It will all be over with the night. The eye of the hideous moon stares back at me. But is it them or me he's watching?

Vision blurring. Didn't see them sneak up. Several of them on the porch now.

"Trick or treat!"

Go away.

"Trick or treat!"

Please.

They wait. They know.

Leave me alone.

Now they're kicking in my door. Calling my name. Oh God, they know.

“Go away!”

Silence. Then: “We know you’re in there, witch!”

The flash again. Dizzy. Fuzzy. A feeling like soaring through a long windy tunnel. Don’t let me pass out. They’ll get in.

I hear breaking glass. In the house. They’re calling my name. They know. They know it was me. Last year. The razorblades. The rat poison. And now the back door flies off its hinges with the sickening splintering of old tired wood.

“Trick or treat!”

I scream, flinging open the door of my haven, my gingerbread house. Running towards the angry red eye of the moon. It was me he was watching all along.

The night should be black, but it isn’t. It’s blinding white. Blinding me as I run. Are my legs moving? I can’t feel them. Far in the distance I can just make out their voices.

And now I feel the sudden sharp pain between my teeth. Then the blood. A bitter copper taste floods my mouth, pours down my neck. My legs give way and I collapse under the white sky. A searing pain carves its way through my guts. Poison. Turning me inside-out. Oh God, the pills. They tricked me.

I try to scream, but the wind tears the voice from my throat. They’re getting closer. I hear their marching dead feet in the dead dry leaves.

And now I recognise the faces of the children as they stand above me, children wearing masks of death. I know them all. They stare coldly down at my shivering, convulsing form. Cold. So cold.

Slowly, their faces fade and I see instead doctors and nurses, more bright lights. A machine looms ominously to my left, its voice one long, steady tone. A

needle of light in my eyes once more, a jolt of pain through my chest, then cold darkness.

Once more the whisper of leaves, the biting chill. And their faces again. Oh, I never wanted to see their faces again.

“Trick or treat.”

I close my eyes. Or perhaps someone closes them for me. I feel their small hands on my frozen body; cold and clammy. Sightless now, but I can still see them. Every one. I know I’ll see them forever.

What is horror?

Jeff Strand

HORROR IS WHEN there's this guy with a chainsaw coming after you, and you're all like, "Whoa! That guy has a chainsaw and I'm relatively certain that I'm his intended target!" But then for six or seven seconds you allow yourself to believe that he's actually planning to saw up the person standing next to you, and you feel kind of bad for that guy, who probably doesn't deserve a horrible gruesome death, but still, better them getting a chainsaw to the neck than you, right? Unfortunately, those six/seven seconds pass and you realise that, nope, that whacko with the chainsaw wants you dead, and you desperately wish that you'd spent those last few seconds of your life thinking about something deep and meaningful instead of just "I bet the guy next to me is dead meat." Then you duck at the last second, and the chainsaw goes right over your head and into the neck of that poor guy next to you, who starts to scream but stops screaming pretty quickly after his head comes off. You escape, but the rest of your life is plagued with feelings of guilt, knowing that you were supposed to be decapitated via chainsaw instead of that other guy, whose goldfish were never fed again. That is horror.

Nightmare by Robert Elrod



ELROD.12

What is horror?

Geoff Brown

THROUGH THE 80s, and the years before, this wasn't as difficult a question as it is today. Before the days of splatter and endless gore, horror was something that evoked an emotion. Fear, dread, shock; something that made your guts twist in terror and a shiver run down your spine. Something that made you hurry when you turned off the last light and had to cross that stretch of bedroom floor to be safely under the blankets. In recent years, the term 'horror' has become more misleading. Now, when I tell people I write horror, they look at me and grimace. This isn't necessarily bad, but horror stretches so much further than the torture-porn and slasher films that seem to dominate the market these days.

Horror fiction should, by my logic, elicit fear or shuddering terror in a reader or viewer. Horror can deal with the supernatural, yes, but to bring these emotions forward, it doesn't have to. It can be anything that creates that feeling of fear.

In the late 70s, Stephen King had *Carrie* published by Doubleday Books, and not long afterward, it was turned into a successful film. For me, this seems to be the beginning of the end. Publishers and film production companies saw the potential that horror held. Horror then went on to become both a marketing ploy and a label. If King could do it for them, the publishers likely thought that the

unsuspecting public would snap up anything that appeared to be similar. Horror lost its kick and became a brand and a niche item – it lost its identity.

Publishers and Hollywood studios pumped out more and more of the same style, and originality became a catch-cry of the past. They all must have been crying out, “If it worked before, it’ll work again.” Along came the days of the ‘same as everything else’ horror book and film.

The ever-changing state of horror had disappeared, so horror went underground. It became the guerrilla fighter of the world of literature. It learnt to hide, to fit into other genres and blend in. In bookstores, horror sections evolved, changed, and in some cases, disappeared entirely.

Here in Australia, we have writers like Shane Jiraiya Cummings, vice-president of the Australian Horror Writers Association for five years, who classes himself more a fantasy writer than a horror writer; we have Greig Beck, published internationally as a thriller writer, although his books certainly contain their share of horror; we have Marty Young, the founder of the AHWA, who is in the process of editing the final manuscript of a coming-of-age traditional horror story, a real throwback to the same kind of stories that made King famous with *Stand by Me* and Robert McCammon’s *A Boy’s Story*. We have Kylie Chan, who writes a cross-genre of urban fantasy and magical realism filled with demons and other monsters.

Chain bookstores have now, for the most part, done away with horror sections, allowing writers to stand on the strength of their prose instead of how their work is labelled. Major New York publishers are releasing books about witches and gargoyles and ghosts, with the word ‘horror’ notably absent from their spines. Recent entries onto the New York Times bestseller lists have included multiple novels about vampires in love, the latest in a long series about a fantasy world from the once-horror author Stephen King, and, of course, the latest genre mash-up which features Abraham Lincoln as a vampire hunter. Not surprisingly,

none of these books bear the horror label, yet every one of them fit our definition of a horror novel.

Films have managed to maintain the horror label, but the imagination has mostly gone. Slasher flick after slasher flick came out for a long while, and now the current trend seems to be remakes of things which once scared us. They look down on horror as one-dimensional guts and gore, without the psychological bent that once created true fear.

This seems to be changing, especially in the indie market. Where money for special effects is lacking, filmmakers are moving back toward suspense and atmosphere. *Grave Encounters*, a more traditional supernatural film by Canadian filmmakers the Visious Brothers made an impact recently, and Australian horror films like *Wolf Creek* and *Rogue* by Greg McLean, as well as *The Tunnel*, a truly-scary 2011 Australian horror film directed by Carlo Ledesma, and co-written, co-produced and co-edited by Julian Harvey and Enzo Tedeschi.

I can only hope that the current changes are for the better.

Snowman’s giblets

Adam Millard

PROUDLY IT STANDS; a behemoth of compacted snow that renders it the largest in the street. Nobody knows who built it, but excited children clad in wintry essentials gather round to marvel at its magnificence. One boy circumspectly ventures forward to investigate, for the children are wary of its existence. There is something not quite right about it. Perhaps it’s the way in which it leers, as if it can not only see the curious bystanders, but can feel them, too. Maybe it’s the clothes it wears. The hat belongs to Roger Wainwright, while the dress looks rather improper on anything other than Roger’s wife, Trudy.

“Be careful, Steven,” someone in the crowd offers. The boy stops, knee-deep in snow, and takes a deep breath; a plume of white mist dances in front of his face as he exhales. He pushes on, ignoring the expectant mumbles of the gathering crowd behind him. Yet as he walks, he can only focus on the thing’s eyes. In the joyous songs and festive films, little chunks of coal are used to create a snowman’s eyes. Steven is almost certain that the eyes staring down at him – a tenacious little boy who wants nothing more than to piss in his pants, yet can’t because of his audience – are leftover Halloween decorations, for they are closer in appearance to real eyes than tiny pieces of coal.

“It’s just a snowman,” someone calls. Laughter ensues, and Steven wants to turn, to tell the crowd to go fuck themselves. If it’s just a snowman, why are they all cowering beyond the Wainwrights’ fence? Perhaps they’re anticipating the elderly couples’ appearance at the door, where they will admonish Steven for trespassing before admiring their wondrous work of art from the comfort of their own doorstep.

With a cursory glance towards the house, Steven knows that the Wainwrights are not watching. Unlike the snowman, who seems to be ushering him forward, closer so that it might inflict upon him whatever devilish deed it has in mind. Steven takes another step; the snow crunches beneath his boot. The crowd gasps. Someone facetiously screams and the audience erupts with laughter, although it is nervous, the sort of giggling and chortling created for the sole purpose of easing tension.

Steven reaches the snowman and realises just how wide it is. The amount of effort that must have gone into building him is admirable; it is certainly not the work of two geriatric misers, which only confuses matters.

Why has nobody claimed the snowman as their own? Steven knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that if he had been its constructor he would be shouting it from the rooftops. ‘Everyone, come see what I made!’ But nobody is, and the snowman’s origins remain a mystery.

Steven pats the snowman on its side and turns to face the sea of anticipating faces. “It’s amazing,” he says. He can feel the icy-cold snow penetrating his glove, and removes his hand before it becomes sodden. “I can’t believe you were all afraid of a snowman.” And now it’s Steven’s turn to laugh. Some of the crowd surge forward to inspect the harmless creation; others make their way home, disappointed that the thing didn’t come to life and eat the silly boy as he approached.

And so the children play, scooping up handfuls of snow and launching them at one another. It's a beautiful day for a snowball fight, and the thaw is already beginning, reminding the children that tomorrow the snow might be gone.

That night rain arrives, peppering the white blanket with pinholes. The snowman casually shrinks, and by midnight its pink innards are exposed. The eyes which had stared out at the anxious crowd the previous day slide down its front, leaving a crimson slug-trail behind them. As if by magic, the snowman is replaced by the frozen shapes of two elderly people, limbs entwined as if in one final act of love. Trudy Wainwright's dress is stripped away and blown across the street, where it drapes itself over a wicker red-nosed reindeer. Roger's hat, with a remarkable stroke of luck, lands upon Roger's decaying head, completing his grotesque appearance. His eye sockets are empty, for his eyes are a foot in front creating marvellous pink blossoms in the fading snow.

As Christmases go, this is not the Wainwrights' best, but it will be one for the rest of the neighbourhood to remember for a long, long time.

What is horror?

Wayne Simmons

ON THE LEVEL we're talking about, horror is entertainment. It's the stuff that scares, and yet entertains and engages us. It's the hand that covers our eyes, during that old movie, fingers spread ever so slightly so that we can still see what's on the screen. It's the sofa we hide behind, the page we're too scared to turn. Horror is the thing behind the door that we absolutely must open.

What is horror?

David Moody

YOU KNOW THE feeling when you're out shopping and you lose sight of one of the kids for a few seconds too long and you think you've lost them or someone's taken them? That's horror.

Or when you head back to the car and check all your pockets then check them all again but you still can't find the keys? Or when you make it back to the car park but the car's not where you thought you left it and you lose your temper and start to panic before you realise you're on the wrong level?

Or when your other half pushes you too far because you screwed up and you're in a bad mood and you've spoiled the day for everyone and it's all your fault and you try and dig yourself out of the hole but the more you say the worse it gets and all you want to do is scream with frustration or punch someone in the face?

Or when you drive too fast because you've had enough of all this shit and you want to get home and you take a corner badly and you almost hit something/someone and the arguments start again and the kids start crying because you're yelling at each other and you can't see a way out?

Stop. Take a breath. Step back from the edge.

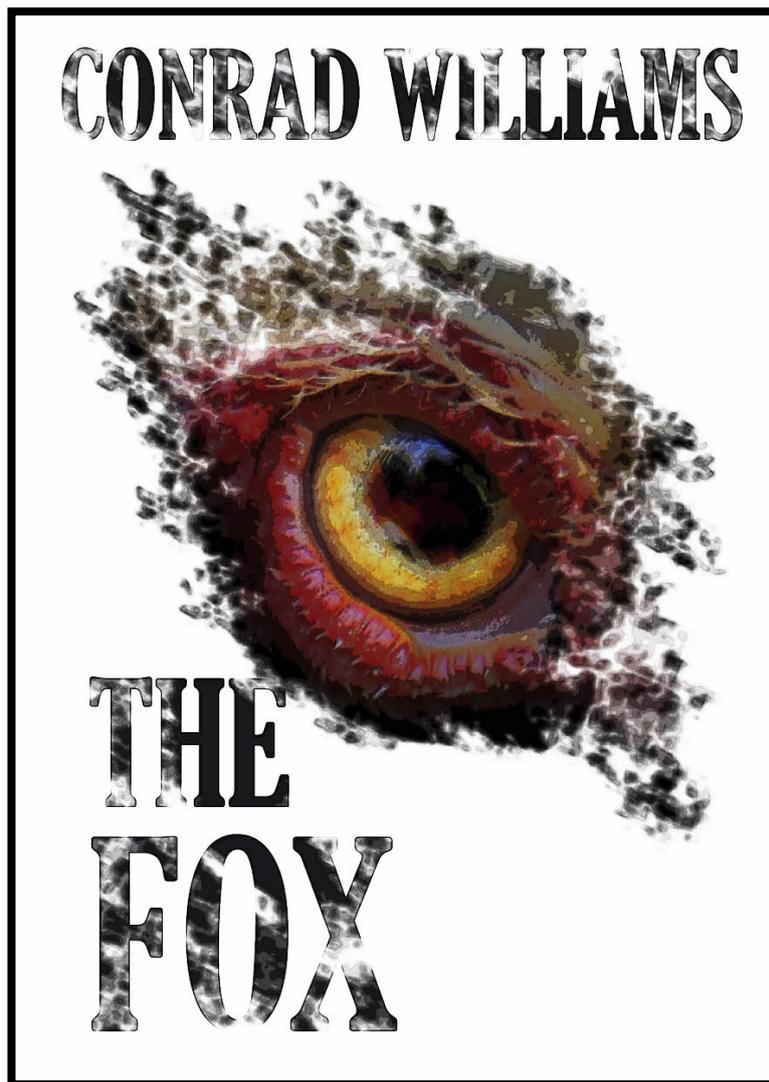
Chances are things aren't as bad as you thought they were. You didn't lose your baby, the car didn't get stolen and you didn't crash. No one got hurt. The arguments will quickly be forgotten. We're all just a bit wound up at the moment, you'll tell each other. We just need a break...

So you survived today, but what about tomorrow?

It's the thin line between what if, and oh fuck. It's the moment when things have gone too far to claw them back, the moment you lose control and your fate is no longer in your hands. It could happen any second, and you know it. You're okay right now, but who knows what the rest of today is going to bring? It's the uncertainty. The unpredictable. The uncontrollable. That's horror.



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