



Title: The impact of personal poetics on a horror writer

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THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL POETICS ON A HORROR WRITER

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MA BY RESEARCH (CREATIVE WRITING)

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THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL POETICS ON A HORROR
WRITER

BY MATTHEW EDLIN

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ABSTRACT

The horror genre invites challenges for the creative writer, new texts for its readers. A horror reader can only predict what he's going to experience; through the glimpses of fear a horror writer might imagine what he's going to write.

This research thesis is an attempt to evaluate the horror genre from several different angles by simply reading and critiquing. It assesses the practice of being a horror writer, and evaluating areas of debate. Areas which carry less significance which need highlighting, a reflection upon personal poetics made between the writer and the text.

Ultimately, new arguments were formed on the basis of what's available in the field already, arguments which could be considered a contribution towards the horror genre.

DEDICATION

Firstly, I dedicate this research thesis to my Grandmother, Yvonne Edlin who sadly passed away recently.

It would be a crime not to mention my supervisor, Lesley McKenna for her constant support, knowledge and encouragements throughout the duration of this course; if something were difficult she always knew how to make it easier. Thank you.

I also dedicate this research thesis to my weird, but wonderful family.

Lastly, I dedicate this research thesis to Ian Gatherer, a colleague and friend of mine from Worthing hospital for his wisdom of literature.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of MA by Research (Creative Writing) at the University of Bedfordshire.

It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

Name of candidate: Matthew Edlin

Signature: 

Date: 14/10/2014

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Fresh Blood

Me, Myself and I

It's just Me, Myself, and I. Always has been, always will be.

I need to write this down because I can feel time slipping through my fingers and I know the clock will stop ticking soon. No one believes me out there. It's as if the words I speak don't reach their ears, or maybe they don't have ears, or maybe, just maybe, I don't have a mouth to speak from anymore.

I know I'm getting old, a tad older each time the sun comes up and the sun goes down and the moon comes up and the moon goes down. I watch dawn sometimes because I can't sleep and I watch sunset because I can't sleep. I'm afraid to sleep because I might not wake up, I'm afraid to move because I might fall down and not get back up; break a bone or two, hear the snap, another wound opens, blood turns to black.

I've never been so afraid in my life. Life has come and gone and left me behind like this: an old fool, wrinkly and shrivelled, and as useless as the bastards and whores who roam the corridors outside.

Those bastards and whores change their faces every day; there's the grey shirt bastard, the blue shirt bastard, the whores in blue, the whores in green; the most special kind of bastards and whores dress in white. Young, handsome, full of energy and hope, and there's me, watching them pass by, trying to remember what *that* felt like.

I don't. Was I always like this? What is *this* life?

My head hurts. I haven't written a word. Think hard about Me and Myself. I can never remember which is which, who is who. One is much, much older than the other, a hell of a lot happier; I feel, can almost touch, this haunting, but comforting sensation that washes over me whenever I see

Myself; he tells me to be happy, and he pours this bucket over me which is full of love and hope. It's rare, he says, but it does happen, this happiness. I get on better with Myself. I think he's Myself. He does exist, whoever he is.

Then there's Me. What a miserable little kid. Again, I can't quite picture Me, but he never smiles, as if he doesn't know what a smile *is*. I've forgotten how to smile, and quite frankly, have no reason to anymore. Me on the other hand doesn't have a reason not to. He's alive and well. I don't know what he's doing with his life, despite the fact he's told me before, and I can tell he's bored of repeating himself – how do I know he's bored of repeating himself? I don't. I *just* know.

Me and I are both on board this wooden raft; the sky is a high, blue dome. The sun warm against our skins. Waves splash against the raft. We're bouncing up and down upon the water; freedom, utmost freedom.

Suddenly, the sky dissolves into a fierce black. Waves become harder and stronger, battering the raft. I can hear cries of screams, but cannot see where from. Now I'm blind, amidst the darkness. Before I know it we've tipped overboard, but Myself grabs us, one by one, and pulls out of the freezing, deadly ocean.

I take a deep breath and remember I'm not drowning and no matter how far I sink down into the ocean and the ocean is cold and wet and evil and unforgiving and I could go on and on and on can you keep up with me please see I'm not insane I'm just born this way and will most likely die this way what are you so afraid of and now I realise I never put my pen to paper I just keep jotting squiggly jotting squiggly against the air oh God my head hurts oh God you're one for the history books why don't you show your face once in a while then people might believe you exist I know I exist I know that much but what's it all for I don't want to die I just want to live oh GOD WILL SOMEONE HELP ME!

'HELP ME!'

A teardrop trickles down my right cheek and I squeeze the tap hard so it doesn't pour.

It's dark outside and these four walls keep getting smaller, the lights are off but when they're on they don't get brighter. I'm curled up under blankets but they don't get warmer, I'm in bed but it might as well be a coffin. The walls are blue but fade to black, I can't write so I might as well be dying.

Oh wait. I am!

I laugh loud and loud and it keeps getting louder.

I wonder when Me and Myself will turn up. We three can be reunited again and who knows it could be for the last time. I thought last time was going to be the last time. Hmm, I don't know, maybe one of those bastards or whores wandering the corridors outside could take a guess, and that better not be one of them knocking at the door because if it is I'M GONNA STAB THEM WITH THIS PEN!

It's just Me, Myself, and I. Always has been, always will be.

There's a lingering silence outside which keeps going up and down the corridor and it happens over and over again. It's as if the silence is chasing footsteps, telling them to stop, afraid it'll never stop, but I don't want it to stop.

Someone make a noise please so I don't feel so alone and trapped here.

Nothing.

I wait a little longer.

Nothing.

There was a noise earlier. Someone knocked on the door, that familiar knuckle on wood, but that happens all the time in this place; whatever this place is. I just eat, sleep, shit, eat, sleep, shit.

I can't remember what they said, but there were voices. Some English, some foreign. It hurts my ears. I don't know or care for this foreign language, and I've given up all hope from the English, but once these voices stop asking questions or stop saying thanks, there it is again...long, dead silence.

It does make me think. That's all I seem to do now. Think, think, and think. It makes me think this:

Am I a part of this room? Is this home? Am I the missing piece?

However, there is one broken piece. You're reading it. It's called Me, Myself and I. Or for the hell of it:

Myself, Me and I.

I, Myself and Me.

The choices. I'm spoilt rotten.

It's a holiday resort here. I know where you can travel. How about here? Food, bed, it's not too cold or too warm, there's some females here.

Hell, I'm sure there's a swimming pool round here somewhere. Ask the bastards and whores outside, but I can't promise you'll get an answer, because I never get an answer, just a simple answer as to WHY the FUCK I'm chained to this bed and succumb to this hell. My arms ache and my wrists are sore –

'You do like to exaggerate.'

I stop talking aloud and look up from my notepad and there's a man dressed in a suit, sat on a chair, one of those blue plastic chairs. There's a grin on his face that I know I've seen before, but I don't know where from, and there's a sincerity in those eyes that I know I've seen before, and before I can ask the question he answers it:

'Yes. It's Myself.'

Before he confirms my suspicions he slides something small and white out of a packet on his lap and places it between his lips. 'How are you this morning?' He grabs something else from his lap, flicks it to reveal a small orange flame, and asks another question:

'Do you mind?'

'What is it?'

'It's a cigarette. You remember those, right?'

I think long and hard before I answer. 'I think so?'

'You used to be a smoker, remember?'

You're asking the wrong person here.

'I remember. And I don't know how I feel.' I'm actually better now there's company. Makes me feel more alive.

Myself lights his cigarette, and smoke begins to trail off the burning end. I can smell it already, and it stinks. 'You had me worried.'

'I know you from somewhere?' I ask, in a whisper.

'Course you know me. I'm the one who suggested you keep a diary.'

'A diary?'

'You're holding it in your left hand.' He's right. 'And that pen is from Me.' Again, he's right. I don't remember Me giving me this pen, but I don't use this as a 'diary'. I use it for –

'Yes, that's right. To remember things,' Myself says, and takes a final drag. 'It's a diary.' He stubs out his cigarette on the floor, stands from his chair, and puts the cigarette in the black refuse bin.

I cough not once, not twice, but loads.

Myself walks over, hands me a small plastic beaker full of water from my bedside table and opens the window. Outside I can hear noises; a cacophony, loud and piercing, confusing and disturbing. I demand Myself to shut the window. I sip some more water down my throat, the wetness of my lips rather soothing, and the coughing subsides. Myself remains at the window. Looks outside, back to me, back to outside:

'It's not as scary out there as you think.'

It's just Me, Myself, and I. Always has been, always will be.

I try to write this down and keep saying it aloud because eventually it'll become true. I'm not alone. I'm here with strangers, but they're familiar strangers. I don't know why and most likely should, but the other two seem to know everything I've done. I don't even remember what love feels like. It's a funny four letter word.

It's still dark outside and the only light comes from a small lamp attached to the wall. These four walls are shrinking and the ceiling is descending. I scream. I'm running out of time. I scream again. I'm running out of life. I scream louder. Tucked up in bed, I'm still so cold.

'Will you stop screaming you miserable old git!' A whiny voice erupts from the other side of the room.

'How dare you talk to him like that,' another voice says, a lot harsher and familiar sounding.

'All he does is fucking moan! Put him out of his misery.'

I look down to see my glasses on my lap. Open them up; place them on the tip of my nose. Blurry vision pushed aside into clarity. It's that kid again, sat on a similar chair next to Myself. He looks just like Myself, dark hair, dark eyes, but a lot smaller and younger. He's dressed in a school uniform, shirt and blazer. No tie.

I know these two have been here before, but I don't know when.

'Who are you two?' I ask full of uncertainty.

'He says this every time we come here,' Me says, full of venom, gritting his teeth.

'The man is unwell, show some respect,' Myself says calmly.

'Neither of you have answered my question!'

'Why don't you jot in down on that stupid notepad –'

'It's a diary –' Myself cuts in before Me finishes:

'That you keep writing in, but clearly never bother to read.'

It's coming back to me now. It's Me, Myself and I.

I flick back through the diary and hurriedly read words...which aren't there.

'I keep telling you to write because it'll help you,' Me says, slouched in his chair, seemingly uninterested.

There's something that needs to be said and it needs to be said otherwise I'll forget.

'Why are you so miserable?' I ask Me, without looking up, still staring at blank pages.

'Me?'

'Yes, YOU!' I yell, attention now on the kid. 'You say I'm a miserable old git, well, you're a miserable young git!'

'How do you expect me to be happy?'

'We have this conversation every time we're together,' Myself says, adding somewhat stability to the situation.

'How do you expect *me* to be happy?!' I respond.

A familiar silence has filled the room between each and every gap from this bed to that bathroom to that window to that door to those sat in the chairs to the old man here on the bed.

Myself decides that's enough of the silence.

'Would you like us to leave?' And that grin has disappeared off his face.

'No, please don't,' I beg. That grin is back and wider than ever. 'We're in this together.' I begin to grasp slightly what's going on here, but flicking through my diary has added further confusion. 'We've been together since the very start. If I die, you die. If I live, you live.'

'You'll forget that come tomorrow,' Me says.

'He might do, but he'll remember again. He always does.' Myself shifts his attention back over here. 'Right?'

Terror grows from the pit of my stomach and gets tangled in my throat.

'...Right.'

Me and Myself have left the room and both promised, though in different tones, to come back soon.

I'm alone again. You'd think I'd be used to this. All I remember is being alone.

It's keeping me sane see I told you I was sane not insane this is not a mental asylum I mean it could be but I couldn't answer because there are no answers here just words without meaning humans without souls a building without a foundation a sport without a goal no love to be shared only to be ignored and I guess that's why I'm here there's nothing else to explore see I told you I could write long into the night and I probably forgot to tell you because I'm old not new.

Thinking about it again I understand the temper that pumps inside that kid's veins which he can't help get a grip on.

He's scared. He has reasons.

Tonight is not as suffocating as I thought it would be. Perhaps that's why Me and Myself come visit, to pass on their hope, but I'm still scared. Afraid to fight. Afraid of what's outside.

Those bastards and whores!

What that kid doesn't understand, and I suppose it comes with age, is that he will make mistakes. I know I have. That's why I'm here. He will win some battles, lose some. I know I've lost this battle.

The kid is a kid. It's as simple as that.

He's going to have a broken heart. Some days will be failures and some days will have sprinkles of hope. He needs to find a job, a career, a purpose. He's at that stage where the walls are high and block out the sun, and if you don't find a way over you'll never know what's on the other side.

I don't want to know what's on the other side anymore.

Speaking of happiness, I don't know where it comes from for Myself, though for the first time he was serious earlier. Normally he doesn't stop smiling.

Then again, he's alive. Shouldn't you smile?

He's lived long enough to know the truth. He's damaged, I can sense it, feel it, smell it, taste it, but those scars are well hidden until it's the right moment to cut the wound open again and share the pain.

Me hasn't got a clue. Not an effing clue! But he will in the future, whenever that will be.

Will I be there to see it?

I'm asking myself the wrong question.

Will I be there to hear it?

Again, I'm asking myself the wrong question.

Will I be there to know it?

Correct question. And yes is the correct answer.

A weight of weary tiredness falls out of nowhere and before I know it I'm struggling to hold this pen –

So the blind is up and the sun leaves its mark on the floor next to the bathroom door and bits of dust float up and down and left and right. The window is open slightly allowing the stale air of this cubicle to be replaced with fresh air from outside where familiar noises make me shiver –laughter, could it be kids? Engines, could it be cars? What could it be?

I was rudely disturbed a couple of hours ago by a knock on the door as I began to awake, and this grey shirt bastard stepped in and ignored me and stole my water jug and said he'll be back soon and I said you better bring that back and he said he always does and I tell him not to fuck with me and soon enough he did bring it back with what I assume was fresh water and not poison. His hair was scruffy and in desperate need of a brush and he looked like he was in need of some kip because he had these ugly purple marks under each eye.

'Did someone hit you in the face?' I asked, as he put the water jug back on the bedside table.

'No,' the grey shirt bastard replied, avoiding eye contact.

'Well, it looks like some man twice your size has clobbered you with some jabs.'

'I just had a late night,' the youngish man said as he yawned and turned to leave.

'What do you mean a "late night"?'

'It's the weekend, sir.'

And before I asked him another question he'd left, closing the door shut behind him.

Then to make matters worse there's another knock at the door and these two whores in green uniform stepped inside and one had red hair and one had black hair and I asked them what the hell do you want and they said we're here to remake your bed and help you wash and tidy up and I said don't fucking touch me I can do it myself but oh no they insisted they must help me and I shouted and swore and one of them whose skin looked soft and smooth as she knelt closer to me said don't swear and I said fine but don't let me be seeing anything I don't want to see and yet again I asked what am I doing here and all I get is because you're poorly and I said then what are you going to do about it!

I don't know when all this happened.

Now, sat here on my wooden chair next to my freshly made bed with the white sheets so bright and a new pair of pyjamas on, I feel like a new man altogether. I peer round the room and the four walls seem bigger and longer, the ceiling higher, the blue walls brighter.

Still, I don't know what the hell I'm doing here and what the problem is. Outside in the corridor I hear those bastards and whores walk past and back, past and back, forgetting I'm here and wanting, needing the answers. Their faces are never the same. Makes me think is mine ever the same?

Makes me think what was I just talking about?

That's a question for Me and Myself.

'What flavour's that, then?' Myself asks.

'Tuna,' I say, mouth filled with bread and tuna.

'Did you not want a bigger lunch?'

I swallow what's left. 'No.'

I reach forward, wanting to move fast but time has slowed me down over the years, and I eventually grab my beaker filled with fresh water. I take a few sips. Myself lights another cigarette (I think that's what he called it?) and stands from his chair and breathes the smoke out the window.

Me, as per, is sat slouched in his chair, staring at the floor.

'Hey, kid,' I say.

No answer.

'I'm talking to you,' I say a little louder.

He slowly raises his head up and returns the attention.

'What?'

'Don't give me that tone, kid. I'm here to help.'

'You're the one who needs help. Not me.'

'Then why are you here?'

'I'm not here.'

'You're not here?'

'Yes. Don't you get it?'

'Get what?' I can feel the beginning of a headache coming.

'What he means is,' Myself says as he flicks the remainder of his cigarette out of the window, 'is we're going to be here for as long as you want. Day or night, any time, we're here.' He undoes his tie and pushes it into his blazer pocket.

'It's hot out there today.' Myself sits back down.

I stare at Me. Me stares back. Myself notices.

'Ask him what he's going to do with his life,' Myself says.

'Who?'

'The kid.'

'Oh.' The kid is sat up now, arms crossed tight. 'What are you going to do with your life?'

'Not what I want to do,' Me replies, as if he's known the answer for ages.

'Explain.'

'I shouldn't have to. You *know* why.'

'Do I?'

'Yes. I wish you would remember why.'

'Give him time,' Myself says, and he looks over to me and smiles.

'Why are you so happy?' I ask him.

'Because I'm the happiest time of your life.'

I try to write this down, but it's all squiggles –

'You're the happiest time of my life? What on earth are you talking about?'

'Ask Me what he's going to do with his life –'

'You already asked him that,' Me snaps. 'He's probably forgot!'

'But you didn't answer. Give him the answer. Now.'

I listen carefully and I could hazard a guess at the answer and I think I might get it right –

'Maths. I'm good at maths, but I hate it.'

'Why?'

'Because you can't express yourself with numbers, can you? You know that. He knows that,' pointing at Myself.

'This isn't about me, it's about you,' Myself says, pushing away his pointed finger.

'I've had enough of this, can we go now?' Me erupts.

'No, we're almost there. Just a little longer.'

'Almost there?' I ask, puzzled more than ever.

'Yes. Look at his face.'

I look at his face. That face is young, a little spotty and red, the first stages of a beard growing, but the eyes, deep inside, tell me something which I've known all this time, but can't quite understand –

I know I know I know –

'Ask him what he's doing with his life,' Me says. Suddenly I feel warm and fuzzy all over. My chest tightens. Myself stands up, and so does Me. I can feel my chest being twisted and knotted.

'What are you doing with your life?' I ask Myself.

'I found a way to express myself through the one thing I loathed, but had the talent for.'

I know I know I know –

'That's why I'm happy.' He turns to Me. 'You'll understand soon.'

'Whatever,' Me says.

'No, please, don't go,' I say, as the two begin to leave. 'No, please, don't go, don't go, PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME!'

Me and Myself stop. No movement. Nothing.

The pain in my chest is getting worse and worse by the second. I'm finding it increasingly harder to breathe. I feel red hot.

But what I do see sends me overboard.

Both their faces, Me and Myself...are changing?

Their hair turns from black to white, their skin from their brows start to wrinkle and the next thing I see is all their skin is wrinkled and they're not standing up straight they're slouching and their vision has worsened because they're looking for their glasses and they've found them in their blazers.

'Come join us,' Myself says, a little croaky.

'It's time to celebrate,' Me adds.

'Celebrate what?' Myself reaches out his arm to open the cubicle door.

One by one, patients step inside.

Male and female – look at me.

Old and naked. Step closer.

Wrinkled and hunched. I'm surrounded.

'Who are you people?! What is this?!'

Oh please let them stop there are so many of them either side of me I can't see a thing but pale and grey oh where's Myself where's Me they must be amongst this crowd of death and they're touching me and they're so cold now they're pulling me forward and I topple over the side railings and lose my balance and slip on the floor I'm surrounded by laughter and wailing it won't stop please let it stop I'm shouting for help but no one is coming until

—

Myself pokes his face through the crowd.

'Who are you?'

The Devil's Theatre

When William Burns opened his eyes, he expected to awaken back to reality. Wherever that reality was however, was dubious and questionable. This room was not where he last slept. This room was tiny, hot, and dimly lit by small, dancing flames that flickered high on the stone walls that encircled him.

If this was a dream it would surely become a nightmare, and if it was a nightmare, William wouldn't be awakening anytime soon.

Unpleasant smells of decay and ash filtered up through his nostrils, making him want to vomit, but for some reason he couldn't. He made a conscious effort to prevent the urge, but no physical response.

Maybe this was a dream.

But if it was, it felt *too* real. You couldn't smell fire in dreams. You couldn't absorb the warmth as William was now, becoming hotter and dehydrated where he sat. You could see, but you couldn't see *everything* in distinct colours and shapes. Not like this. William could feel and touch what he was wearing, which was a black suit.

Maybe this was reality.

He looked over his shoulder to see a gate wedged between the stone walls; a singular tall, black imprisonment. He rose from his chair, stepped closer and grabbed cold, rusty metal. Beyond the gate appeared to be broken concrete slabs, ascending high above where he stood, shaping into a staircase. Beyond that darkness stared back at him.

After a failed attempt to open the gate, William traipsed back to his chair. He wiped the trickling sweat from his forehead, then realised the skin of his hands was fair and smooth. No wrinkles or creases. Then he touched his face and discovered similar texture. He expected to feel relief because he

wasn't used to thinking this way anymore, but instead he felt nothing. It was as if he couldn't stimulate any kind of emotion whatsoever.

But William *could* touch.

On younger legs then he was used to, he approached the stone walls and reached out his arms. Looking closely he could see cracks across the grey, timeworn walls. His fingertips could touch and feel the sturdiness and firmness of what was in front of him. A flame cackled and popped to his side high upon the walls, drawing William closer, almost sucking him in. He knew fire could burn and harm and had no intention to find out if it was *real*, but he wanted to feel the heat.

William waved his hand across the flame from a safe distance, feeling the heat against his palm. He looked up into the flame, watching the red and orange colours dance, and now, mesmerised by their movements, stared as the flames twisted and twirled, rose up and down, side to side...

A face appeared inside the flame. It took William a second to regain his focus, and as he gazed upwards again, he could clearly see the shape and form of something human looking down at him, returning his gaze. Despite the sizzling of the fire and its sinuous movements, somewhere inside that blaze was a stranger, brown hair and brown eyes, a terrified expression holding William's attention until it had complete control –

William almost stumbled back into the chair. He regained his balance and vision, looked up at the flame again, and what he saw was simply the flickering of the fire. He rubbed his eyes which stung profusely from sweat and the blinding of the red and orange colours which pulled him closer.

Suddenly he realised who was inside that flame.

Suddenly, he felt alive for a split second; a rush of ecstasy, blood pumping through his veins.

William closed his eyes and listened to the fire. His vision now gloomy, only illuminated from the light above, he started to feel a little dreamy. He reassured himself that this was just a dream, perhaps a lucid

dream, and like most dreams you wake up when it all becomes a bit *too* real
–

A long, wailing scream came out of nowhere, broke William's concentration. He had no earthly idea where that sound arose from. Now suddenly alert, he could hear the volume of the screams – louder and louder, shrieks, cries, agonisingly deafening –

All that accompanied the silence was the roaring of the flames. William stopped pushing his hands against his ears. He took a deep breath and sat back down. His heart was racing, but when he moved his hand over his chest, there was no heartbeat. No thump or thudding.

Am I alive?! Am I dead?!

How could he know?

Loud and heavy footsteps approached from somewhere behind those walls. Just as William's heart slowed down it burst into life again and started to accelerate. Again there was no thumping from his chest, but he trembled and shivered, sweat dripping down onto his suit, petrified as to why he hadn't awoken from this nightmare yet.

WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP!

The footsteps stopped. He opened his eyes. Ahead of him a big chunk of the wall opened up and out of the blackness stepped forward a towering figure. The man was a monster. Bulging pectorals stretched the top of his shirt and wide, muscular arms hung loosely beside his hips. William goggled up towards the beast in amazement. The monster of a man spoke.

'It's time to decide your fate.'

William reassured himself it was just a nightmare and he would awaken soon.

WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP!

But he did not. A few feet away stood a man who had thick, bulgy legs connected to a pile of muscle, glared down upon him with wide, savage eyes. The skin on his face and arms were red and flaky.

William didn't move. He remained seated, frozen in fear. Suddenly that fear melted when the beast stepped closer and William was out of his chair, feeling small and frail compared to this giant.

'Follow me.'

William wanted to escape that small, hot, dimly lit room. Now he wished he could have continued to sit inside. The brawny man led him down a long, dark, stone corridor, his footsteps loud and powerful. Occasionally there was light from small, glowing flames on sides of the walls, but mostly it was shadows. William looked down and saw what must have been ash he was traipsing over down this corridor. It smelt worse along here than back there inside that room; vomit, blood, rotten flesh.

The loud, heavy stomps stopped. William almost bumped into the giant's wide and muscle stacked back. The giant stepped aside, looked down at William. His large, hairy hand gave William a hard push forwards from the back.

William lurched out onto what seemed to be a large stage, and what must have been an audience responded with thunderous applause and cheers. He straightened up and looked out through the dimness to see a group of people; his first thought was humans, snarling and laughing and clapping excessively, but the longer he stared the more he noticed what was unusual. Each person had one half of their bodies exposing skeleton, white and bony, the other half dripping with blood and decaying skin and flesh. The noise was unbearable. He looked behind him to see the beast of a man standing on guard, arms folded, unfazed.

The ovation ended.

Through the centre of the stage in big puffs came dense smoke which stank of acrid charcoal. William watched in horror as a figure appeared to rise through the stage. Once the smoke dispersed he could make out what he hoped was a man, showcasing a strange outfit.

'It's about to get a little darker inside here, William Burns.'

Trails of smoke lingered up and along the stage, making William nauseous from its sick and dense odour. He breathed through his mouth, trying to block out the stench, but warm, tangy fumes entered his mouth and tasted bitter. Whatever this place was, it reeked of copper and salt. The figure at the front of the stage still stood with its back facing William. Through the murkiness he could see the figure was wearing a distinctly scarlet coloured suit. Sleek black hair dangled over his nape and shoulders.

‘No need to be alarmed,’ a honeyed voice said. ‘I’m just doing my job. And a man must do his job.’

The figure looked over his shoulder to see William’s gape. William was relieved at first to see a man’s face, but a disfigured face stared back with wide, dead eyes, holding no colour or shade. The man grinned, exposing sharp teeth which glistened from saliva. A long, purple tongue stuck out. He licked his lips.

‘I never tasted sweeter.’

William then noticed something strange on his pasty face. Across his nasal bridge, connecting to his eyebrows was a heart shape made from what must have been stitches. He was distracted to this’s man’s appearance; the red suit, the lifeless eyes, the stiches just above his cartilage. William’s vision was muddled and blurred all at once.

‘I deliver an impact,’ he said, his voice soothing to William’s ears. ‘A man must be vain on his arrival. You might never see him again.’ He pointed a long, nail-less finger straight at William, and William felt a sharp pain push against the centre of his chest.

The man turned to face his silent and awaiting audience.

‘This wouldn’t be a show without our light.’

And to that, he stuck out his arms, palms upward, and raised them high above his head to reveal a bright, fiery illumination. The building now alight, William saw an enormous burning shape of a cross. However, there was

something different about this cross; something about its shape. Suddenly, William noticed what it was. A wave of goose bumps broke out all over his arms. This wasn't an ordinary cross. This cross was upside-down, sharp edged. It cackled and popped noisily.

'We do things a little differently down here,' the man said, lowering his arms. 'Here there is no sunlight. We don't have skies. No moon rises. There's no open space in which to become liberated.' He turned around to face William who was caught between what decaying humans he could see in the crowd and the giant fire that now irradiated above the audience.

He glowered at William, whose sweat continued to dampen his suit, now shuddering where he stood. 'We are the *final* escape.'

The audience burst into loud ovation. The man edged closer to William in catlike steps. William believed this was real; the bizarre stranger approaching him did indeed exist and whatever this building was held something horrific inside its depths for everyone else to witness.

'Solitude can drive a man insane.' The man reached out his pallid hand. 'I'm Sole.' William watched as his pale hand came closer, recognising the gesture and refusing to shake it.

'I'm here to help,' Sole said, which caused chuckles from the audience. 'An audience needs a show and a show needs an audience.' William now noticed he wore an arrow shaped tie which matched the pallor of his skin, pointing down towards his waist. Slowly William raised his hand and shook his, Sole's skin feeling silky in his grip. Sole let go, signalled to the audience who hushed, and put an arm round William, which felt heavy and prickly against his shoulder. 'A chair deflects our stance.'

At the back of the stage were two chairs close to each other, both made out of different shapes and sizes of bones; skulls, arms, legs. William almost screamed when he saw a set of giant wings at the back of the stage, their tips dimly lit by fire. He reluctantly went to sit down, and out of

nowhere he heard a scream. William jumped back, still on his feet. Behind him, the audience giggled. Sole sat down.

'Ignore them. They're harmless.' William could see one of the skulls from the chair opening and closing its jaw. 'Please, sit,' Sole said. 'I understand this is a lot to take in. Shock has no boundaries.' Eventually, William sat amongst the bones, and from the second he sat he expected another scream from a skull, but nothing. He kept his arms folded, afraid to touch the arms of the chair.

The audience watched on and William could see eyes gazing up towards him. He tried not to make it obvious, occasionally glimpsing over to see what other creatures and monsters could be down there in attendance. He noticed that some of these decaying humans were drinking and smoking, the smell vividly strong and floating near.

'Can I call you William? Will?' And before William could respond he said, 'Or perhaps Burns One. Burns Two will be joining us soon.' Sole looked over his shoulder to the other side of the stage. All William could see was a dark hole, similar to the one he was just pushed out of.

He finally found the courage to speak, accepting this was just a nightmare he would awaken from soon.

'...Call me Will.'

'Okay, Will. I *Will*.' The crowd tittered.

William stuttered at first. 'W-w-where am I? Who are you?'

'That's not important, Will. What's important is this.' He looked up at the burning cross, pensively. 'You've been many people, Will. You should be proud. The path to be a husband and father isn't an easy route to walk down. But you did it. You succeeded in your profession, too. No one would object to that life. I know I wouldn't have done. We're all human.'

Sole continued to chatter, glimpsing at his surroundings and the audience. William listened to what he said and some words struck a chord deep within him. It was like reality was descending upon him, reaching out,

shouting his name, trying to save him and take him away from this hideous place. Suddenly something felt familiar and he got a sense of who he was again. Or what he was about to become.

Sole finished his last sentence.

'...But within these cracks of confinement we build around ourselves leaks the horrible truth of who we are. You're about to find out.'

Sole rose from his chair and strolled to the front of the stage.

'Give her a round of applause!'

A petite girl, teary eyed and trembling, stepped out onto the stage. William didn't recognise her at first, but as she shakily came closer to him he felt a longing awareness of who she was: her oval face; bright, blue eyes; hazelnut hair. William thought he must have only been inches taller than her, then realised he would have been.

She was Mary; his girlfriend.

Out stepped another giant of a man who looked identical in size to the one that had coldly disrupted William earlier. He stood at the side of the stage, arms folded, indifferent.

Sole turned to face Mary who jumped, wide eyed, at his appearance.

'I'm just as beautiful on the inside as I am on the outside,' he said, more honeyed than ever. 'I have a habit of perturbing guests.'

Mary approached the bone shaped chair next to William and unsteadily sat down. She didn't look at him; she sobbed and bawled.

'Mary,' William called through the uproar of the crowd. 'Mary, it's me.' She turned to face him, her eyes red, and lips wobbling.

'Who are you?' she said against the tears. 'Where am I?'

'It's me, Mary. William.' The crowd continued to applaud.

'Look, everyone, it's her Willy!' Sole joked, sending the audience into fits of laughter.

'William?' Mary responded, and this time she had growing confidence.

'Yes, it's me,' he said, grabbing her hand and kissing it. 'Don't you remember?' Mary looked more confused than petrified. 'Please, don't cry,' William begged.

Sole faced the giggling and lively audience.

'My friends,' he shouted, 'do they look like the perfect couple?'

'YES!' the audience yelled back.

'But they're not, are they?' Sole asked.

'NO!' the crowd responded. Mary tightened her grip on William's hand, squeezing it hard.

'William,' she said, sending waves of relief through his body, 'what's going on?'

'I don't know, Mary. I wish I did.'

'I know exactly what's going on,' Sole said loudly above the audience's racket. Turning to face the couple, he raised his arms high in the air.

'This...is...THE DEVIL'S THEATRE!'

Once the crowd had quietened William began to get a hold again on his gloomy surroundings and the isolating situation. He was inside what looked to be a theatre, a weird and boisterous crowd in attendance, with a presenter known as Sole, who now wandered up and down the front of the stage in small, steady steps. Mary continued to sob despite William's begging, and seeing her cry was the worst thing he could *ever* see. He was also disturbed to see that the curtains at the front of the stage were made out of what looked like human skin, blood splattered in places he *could* see. The illumination above the audience seared brightly.

Sole ended the silence.

'You don't want to drown in your own tears.' One of the burly men who William concluded were bodyguards for this event marched over and gave Mary a small box of tissues and returned to his position. Mary used a red

tissue to dab her face and blow her nose. William felt deep pain at the state of her, anger increasing inside his very veins. Or so it felt.

‘We relish the excruciation of someone else’s misery. It’s a cold, sad, undoubted fact.’ William could feel the ache in those words and regrettably, the truthful acceptance. ‘This is not a game,’ Sole continued. Mary had finally stopped crying, leaving a rosy and sour complexion on her face. ‘Without the beginning we cannot live. Without the end we have no purpose.’ Sole stopped and looked at the couple.

‘Mister and Missus Burns. We know it wasn’t love at first sight. That doesn’t exist. If it that was the case then we’d all be content for just one person. What we *do* know is that William fell in love first.’ William and Mary exchanged a baffled expression. ‘A man’s heart has the power to control his mind.’ William still held Mary’s hand, intent on never letting her go. ‘It’s an art of unmasked disposure.’ Sole edged closer and crept down besides Mary. Inside those wide, white eyes was a demon or beast pulling the strings of this creature, William thought, controlling and manipulating him.

‘A man can steal a woman’s heart,’ Sole began, ‘but a man refuses to give it back.’

Then he straightened up, licked the moisture from his lips, and moved over to William and knelt down.

‘A woman can steal a man’s heart,’ he said, ‘but a woman can disregard it with all the others until she finds one she likes to hold.’

Sole stood up. ‘A man’s heart and a woman’s heart are two different organs. Both are red, pumping life, but the blood that flows is stained from different shades. And those shades are the representations of true colour.’

He meandered from William and Mary to face the crowd. His voice raised a level. ‘We’re a far more interesting bunch down here. The angels ignore our invitations. This is the greatest show under earth.’

William and Mary were now connected in a pit of spiralling misery and despair. He could feel her warmth and the blood that flowed through her

veins and the butterflies that were trapped in tiny cages inside her stomach. Inside the temple of her beauty was a frightened little girl. Inside him now unlocked and free was the fearsome loathing of who he *actually* was. Sole had weaved his darkened charm into his subconscious and soul, hidden from all view and barriers, eating at the supposed life he lived.

If this was a nightmare, the end was far.

If this was real, the conclusion was impending.

Sole turned around and ran a finger through his slick black hair. He looked at William.

‘I’ve never been bored of this job. I stand alone on that sentiment. This is business. Business has no patience.’

Mary spoke in a brittle voice:

‘What’s he going to do, Will?’

William matched her dread.

‘I don’t know, Mary, but I’m not letting go.’ He clasped her hand forcefully.

Step by step, slow and gradually, Sole, the blazing glow enlightening his whitish skin, covered in sweat, knelt forward towards William.

‘Look into my heart.’

William headed down the road to the house where his wife was waiting for him. Fresh air never tasted so smooth and tender in his lungs. He was walking down the street, the sky boasting of two different tales; one half exposed a fading blue, and the other half an overcast of rain. He held a black suitcase and the hand that gripped it showcased his wedding ring. Due to a tube strike he had to wait to catch his train home, resulting in longer, sluggish bus journeys.

Hastily, he was led down the path by an invisible lure, entered the house, and closed the front door. Blazer hanging, suitcase propped against the wall, he began to undo his tie and shirt buttons.

He stopped unbuttoning.

Up the stairs coming from what he knew was his bedroom was the din of thumping and the moaning of satisfaction. William was struck by a sledgehammer containing sudden anger, shock and fear, and as he stepped upstairs towards his bedroom, past a framed picture of himself and Mary on their wedding day, which hung on the wall, these noises became louder and unbearable. He wanted to block out the sounds, hands over his ears, but that was *his* girl, *her* voice, and he wasn't the *one* delivering pleasure. Trembling, he stood outside the bedroom door.

William peered inside to see another man thrusting deep and hard inside Mary, her legs wrapped tightly around his waist, screaming with ecstasy, two naked bodies entwined together in sexual connection. He couldn't believe what he was witnessing and just as he was about to roar and ultimately stop this horror he blinked and was inside The Devil's Theatre again...

Sole stood inches from him, bright lights fading from inside his stitched shape heart. His pale skin returned, along with his snarl, perfumed breath and dead eyes. He took several steps back.

'We underestimate the powers of fate. One decision from someone can alter the outcome and events we witness on just a simple late afternoon. That's what you would have witnessed if it wasn't for that tube strike.'

William felt as if deep sleep had sucked him down into oblivion and spat him back out into reality. Talking to Sole, but looking at Mary, who had clearly been upset by shockwaves, her eyes watery, William asked the question.

'What the hell just happened?' His voice was uneven. He felt the shaking of Mary's body through his hand.

'That, my friend, is the death of love. Within a second love can shatter. Love is fragile and must be held firmly. You're firm right now, but that grasp is waiting to break. Do it, Will. Let go.'

William didn't let go. Instead he clasped tighter, and Mary started to weep again.

'Mary?'

She managed to find her voice through the tears, her softly, fragmented voice.

'What's happening to you?' she said in pure horror. She screamed and let go of him.

'What, what is it?!' he cried.

'Look at yourself, Will,' Sole began. 'Time has done its job.'

William looked down to see wrinkled skin and hoary hair on his hands. A wedding ring appeared on his finger. Suddenly he didn't feel so young and energetic; he felt slow and feeble, and when he glanced over at Mary she squealed until the audience erupted into hilarity again.

'I've got to spread my wings,' Sole blared, tossing and twisting as he moved back and forth across the stage like a cat chasing the tail of a mouse.

William tried to talk, but couldn't believe the difference in his voice; words came slower and were harder to articulate.

'W-w-what h-have y-y-you done t-t-to m-me?'

'I haven't done anything, my friend,' Sole responded, moving closer to him. 'Ask her.'

Laughter still resonated within the walls of the theatre. Sole pointed to his ears to calm his guests down, hushing them. Even though William had aged, Sole still looked as grim and pasty as ever. Through old eyes William glared at Sole.

'A-a-ask her what?'

'Ask her if she loved you.' William had never felt so disconsolate, fighting the urge to sob because men did *not* sob. Men did not cry. Only the weak cry. He turned to face a dismayed Mary, her eyes hidden behind her delicate fingers.

'I don't need to ask her. I know she loves me.'

'I haven't heard her say it yet,' Sole said, exasperated.

'I don't care if you haven't heard it,' William antagonized, 'you freak of a man.' The audience gasped. Some of them growled and drooled.

Sole was unresponsive. He put his hands inside his trouser pockets. 'That's right,' continued William. 'You've done all the talking. I don't know where the fuck I am and I don't give a fuck why I'm here, but this sick, twisted game of yours is over.' He half expected a reaction out of Sole. He felt good, *really* good for speaking out. Instead the man in scarlet turned his back, edged closer to the audience, and tilted his head up towards the blazing cross.

'You're just like all of our guests,' Sole exclaimed. 'This is not a game, William Burns. This theatre was built for the justification of sinners. We must accept temptation, otherwise we bore. No one is innocent. There's no one up in heaven except the angels because their standards are *too* high.' He exhaled and ran a hand through his hair. Afterwards he used both hands to point to the surface of the stage. 'Once you go down, you never come up.'

The stage vibrated and hummed. William felt a drop in his stomach, fearful he was going to cave in into complete darkness. Sharp rattling pounded his ears, wails of gusts and screaming ascending underneath the stage. Mary peered forward. She gasped first and she failed to voice her dread, stuttering and quivering. William attempted to peer forward, but old age, and back and hip pain made it agonizing. He gaped once he saw what was below.

Through the cracks of a fog were whirling spirits, pits of fire, dark land and sharp ice scattered downwards and downwards with no end in sight, across several different lands and layers. 'Oh God,' William muttered. 'Oh my God.'

'God is too busy dusting the clouds.' Sole was standing right in front of the couple. He rolled up his sleeve to look at a sparkling, diamond watch,

revealing the end, and then cast glimpses at both his bodyguards. 'We're running out of time.'

'NO, NO NO,' Mary cried.

'YES, YES, YES,' Sole mocked.

William looked down to see a single strand of white hair on his lap. He picked it up and brought it closer for further judgment.

'A strand of age,' Sole said, kneeling down next to Mary. 'A cardiac arrest can't save one down here. Stop shaking.'

'You did this to me,' William said, glaring at Sole. '*You* did this!'

'Don't blame me, Will. I'm no figurehead. This is *my* job. I'm justice.'

'What are you going to do?' Mary asked, breathing erratically.

'Don't ignore me!' William shrieked.

'This is *my* show. *I'm* talking.' Sole turned his attention to Mary. 'You still haven't answered the question. Mary, look at me.' After a moment's silence she finally answered his demand.

'Yes, of course. I love William,' her words rushed. Sole's face was only inches from hers.

'Then why did you commit infidelity?'

Suddenly William remembered the web he'd been trapped and immovable in when he saw Mary having sex with another man. He thought it was Sole's sick manner of jesting, but the elements of this situation were *too* real to ignore and reject.

This wasn't a nightmare. This was *the* waiting room.

'What are you talking about?' Mary said. Sole stood and started slinking back and forth across the stage.

'Frustration and loneliness fractured this relationship.' Abruptly he stopped in front of Mary, heaved a sigh. 'You won't remember because of your current form, Mary, but about now William shall be experiencing his recall.'

William remembered something haunting and lasting, but there was no place to run or hide. He cowered in his seat and watched as Sole tortured his girl.

‘Look into my heart, Mary.’

Rays of light shone out through the stitches of Sole’s heart. William watched as the brightness slowly gained control of her, forcing her to relieve the memory of what he did to her before he died. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, red mist escaped her mouth, and she shook all over.

William watched Mary age; her skin shrivelled, that hazelnut hair shrunk and faded white, and she shortened marginally in size. Her wedding ring appeared. He could see the pain in her eyes, the horror and disgust as she stared back. William didn’t realise that Sole had crouched down next to him.

‘You murdered her.’

The audience exploded into applause once again. Through the clapping, William heard Sole. ‘No one takes the pleasure of death other than death itself.’

Sole ushered the bodyguards over. Suddenly, two long and scrawny arms from each chair stretched out and grabbed William and Mary, hugging them tight across their chests. Both of them screamed, unable to move.

‘For hell’s sake,’ Sole said. ‘Let go.’ None of the arms responded, only gripped tighter. ‘NOW!’ Sole exclaimed. The arms let go, and slowly retreated back into the collection of bones.

‘Back to you, gentleman,’ Sole continued. Both bodyguards grabbed the napes of the aged couple. The stage melted and fell away, and the screams were penetrating and the stench of blood and decay nauseating.

William glanced at Sole one final time. He teasingly and smoothly floated above the hole in the stage, purple fog encircling him.

‘You will descend into the depths of Treachery and be stuck with the glare of Satan for eternity.’

Watch Out

I'm no longer Edward Marshall. Age is irrelevant now. My job is worthless. It won't be long until I'm chucked into a mental institute for investigation or simply shot dead. The worst thing is it happened and is *still* happening. I couldn't have envisioned this at the start of the summer. I could never envisioned this whatsoever, the freak I have become. It's unthinkable and unimaginable.

This was supposed to be another summer filled with blue skies and freedom. Instead the skies were dreary and I was at first restrained, captive, now imprisoned.

I used to gallivant, luring girls to share bottles of wine in the bars on the seafront. A long, tipsy saunter would begin down the concrete pathway, watching the sun descend and the stars twinkle. Waves crashed against the shores, music could just be heard in the distance. There's something about the transition of day into night that I've always found peaceful and romantic to share with someone. Darkness signalled change; moonlight indicated the light of intimacy. The gentleness of a kiss implied the day was over.

Sitting on a bench while strangers either ignored us or inattentively walked on, left alone to enjoy those moments.

But when those moments are a regular occurrence and eventually become futile, it develops into a constant reminder of what I've changed into; a freak, a weirdo. Abnormal. Suicide is not an option. I don't have the power to decide or dictate fate.

The intimacy would continue back at my flat and whatever happened afterwards just happened. I didn't think much about it or care. Women either wanted something more serious or just wanted sex. I was imprudent

at the beginning of my career as a hospital porter. People tended to come and go.

This all unfolded at the beginning of June. I remember it vividly because it was the single sweltering day of summer we had. No breeze to cool the warmth, constant drinking of fluids; cracked lips, sweat patches. Even the Vaseline melted inside the pocket tub I always carried on shift.

I helped transfer a patient from A&E major's midevening up to Becket Ward, situated on the east wing, first floor. From what I gathered Becket Ward is an assessment unit for elderly patients, commonly with fractured or broken hips. As I steered the trolley into the ward there was an unpleasant odour of excrement drifting from the bay behind me. The petite Philipino nurse pushed the stretcher closer to the reception desk.

I saw Jasmine for the first time.

She sat behind the reception desk in her green uniform, using a touchpad of some kind. Her red hair was twisted into pigtails which I instantly found cute. She looked up and I smiled; eventually she smirked back. Her face was naturally pretty, not too much makeup. I wondered why I'd never seen her before and assumed she must be a new member of staff.

Once we knew what bed number the patient was destined for we drew the curtains and using the rigid, green board, pat-slided her onto the bed. I hated touching patients so I never helped roll them onto their sides, just slid them across from the trolley onto the bed. Jasmine didn't assist which was a surprise, but I managed to spark a conversation with her before I returned to A&E.

'Not a fan of the pat-slide, then?' I said, stopping at the reception desk. She looked up, nearly embarrassed.

'No,' she giggled. 'I'm just behind on my obs.'

'Hot today, isn't it?' I continued. I let go of the trolley and grabbed a plastic cup from the water cooler and eagerly waited for it to fill. Cold liquid soothed my parched throat.

'I know,' she said, echoes of disappointment in her tone. 'I'd rather be down the beach.'

I realised I had sweat patches on the underarms of my shirt and was careful to keep that hidden. I dropped the empty cup into the closest refuse bin.

'In the water or sat on the stones?' I asked, grabbing the back of the trolley. We didn't have the best beach here; no sand, dirty water.

'On the stones,' she said, 'I'm never swimming in that water.' She put the touchpad down on the desk and stood from her chair. Subtly I observed she had a bit of plumpness on her hips, but not too much anywhere else. 'I'll sit with you on the stones, then,' I said, casting a glance over my shoulder as I left the ward. She grinned.

When I returned home after that shift I was telling Stephen Zhāng, my flatmate, all about this new pretty nurse I'd met. He'd heard it all before, but like all good friends, he listened. I've known Stephen since high school and considered him to be a lifelong friend. I didn't have many friends. Now I have none.

After that first encounter with Jasmine I didn't see her for a while. That's when the clouds arrived and the rain fell.

I started my rota of early shifts. Stephen worked at our local Barclays doing data entries and tended to be home by half five. Our flat wasn't far from the town centre; nor was the hospital. I'd just finished having an afternoon nap, groggy and moving back into reality again, when he returned home and informed me of the death of his grandmother.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, guessing it wasn't the first time he'd heard it that day. We stood in our usual positions, me on one side of the kitchen, him on the other.

'Yes, it's horrible. She was sick for a long time. Cancer's evil.'

'I know. Will you be flying out there for the funeral?'

Stephen dropped his rucksack on the counter next to the oven and replied: 'I will be, yes. Gonna talk to the parents later about it. Work said I can use emergency leave for the length that I'm gone.'

'Reckon you'll be gone a while?'

'No more than a week.' I knew this was the last thing he had to deal with right now, amidst pursuing a promotion.

'Seen Jasmine yet?' he asked, changing the conversation.

'No,' I moaned. 'I need to unleash.'

'I'll bring you back something from China,' he promised. 'It'll change your luck. Not that you need it.'

That he did. He returned from China the following weekend, night-time, jetlagged like hell, energy drained from his system. He unzipped his suitcase on the lounge floor, grabbed a small cardboard box and handed it to me.

'Hopefully this will you shut you up about Jasmine,' he joked.

Inside was a piece of china. I didn't know what it was at first, but then realised this was a small drum. I held it in my palm, admiring the rich colours, white, brown and red, of the artwork and handles. Attached to the larger handle was red tassel. This drum was similar to the shape of a lamp, but visibly not a lamp. I don't know what it was, but something about the weight and shape of this object gave me a sense of power. It was mine.

'You see that writing there?' Stephen said, poking a finger to the Chinese writing, his fingertip tracing over the words. 'It says: 'Good luck must be handled with greater care.'

I thanked Stephen and he finished unpacking and went straight to bed. From what I gathered the funeral went as well as a funeral can and was at the same time a welcomed break from here. I left the drum on my bedroom windowsill, close to my desk.

I could feel the ache in my feet and the general tiredness of starting at six in the morning. Continuously I checked the time on my mobile. Just

before handover I had to take an ordinary mattress to Becket Ward. Luckily I was on the second floor at the time and managed to find one leaning against the wall down a corridor. I picked it up with what little energy I had left, carried it over my shoulder, and headed to the east wing lifts. I stepped out of the lift, took a left down the corridor towards the ward. Patches of dampness glistened across the beige surface of the floor. Clearly a housekeeper had been remiss.

I dropped the mattress off at the reception desk. Couldn't see any staff, but could hear conversations in every bay.

I left the ward, pleased I hadn't seen any ex's that morning and frustrated not to see Jasmine, but when I reached the end of the corridor I bumped into someone.

'Oh, sorry,' the nurse said.

I had to take my chance. 'About time I saw you again.'

Jasmine and I spoke fleetingly and she appeared to be surprised when I asked her out. We agreed to go for a drink together at Tangerine bar which was a favourite of mine on the seafront, and luckily the date was on a Thursday. No trepidation of bumping into unexpected and unwanted faces. I got her number and that was that.

We sat outside the bar on a wooden table close to the main entrance, two tall palm trees on either side, which looked so out of place. No one else was outside so I felt like I had her all to myself; scattered inside were a few groups of people, mostly male. There were patches of fading blue sky breaking through the clouds. Nightfall was sinking closer. It wasn't warm or cold. An odd dreariness hung over us as we engaged in conversation.

I learnt a few things about her over our bottle of Sauvignon. She too had decided to abandon education after failing college. She too wanted to make the most of her youth; travelling, partying, the usual. Jasmine was quite keen in regards to her profession as a nursing assistant, which I'd heard

all before with previous girls, but she seemed genuine and proud of it. I started to warm to her; she reminded me of someone, but I couldn't think of who. She had a straight set of white teeth which produced a glowing smile, and beautiful emerald eyes. Her red hair was down and hung loosely and neatly over her shoulders.

After we finished our bottle of wine, I invited her back to mine.

I showed her the flat briefly, and her jealousy was apparent as she was still stuck at home with her parents. Stephen would have been drifting into slumber as I showed her around. We whispered and bantered playfully like two adolescents up to no good.

We stepped into my bedroom. I deliberately let her step inside in front of me so I could admire her body in that white sundress she wore. Against the chimneybreast was my double bed, tidied and waiting for us; I always prepared for the best outcome. She looked at herself in the mirror of my wardrobe, playing with her hair. I got a playful slap after me telling her not to break it.

That's when she saw the small drum. She wandered over and picked it up from the windowsill.

'This is beautiful. Where did you get it from?'

I undid the top button of my shirt, wandered closer, smelling the perfume that floated from her skin; warm, honey, inviting. 'Flatmate brought me it from China.'

'Did he go travelling?'

'His grandmother just passed away.'

'Oh,' she said, sheepishly. 'Well, if he ever goes out there again, tell him to bring me one back.'

'Bossy, aren't you?' I said. She put the drum back down on the windowsill, turned to face me. She stepped closer and I brushed aside a few dangling red hairs to see her whole face. We kissed, and her lips were so soft. I moved my hands gently through her hair and down her back towards

her buttocks, but she teasingly clutched my hand and moved it away. Instead, I reached out and pulled the string to close the blinds. She went to rest her arm down on the windowsill –

Bang.

The drum fell onto the floor. The tip of the larger handle had chipped.

‘Oh my god, I’m so sorry,’ Jasmine said. The heat of the intimacy almost vanished, but I was still turned on. I knelt down and picked up the drum; beside it lay a small chip from the handle.

‘That’s alright,’ I said, hiding my anger. I straightened up and placed the small drum and the chip back on the windowsill. ‘You can apologise by kissing me again.’

In that exact moment I wished I had carpet instead of hard-wooden floors.

The cheerfulness and pleasure from that date with Jasmine soon faded after I bumped into Fiona inside A&E when I started the rota of late shifts. A&E was heaving, the busiest I had seen it in a long time; majors and resus were both full and some patients were waiting on trolleys outside the departments, either heading into to x-ray or be transferred up to a ward. I was pushing a trolley down the corridor, circles of twinges and niggles down my back when Fiona emerged from the staff room to the right of me. She had a contemptuous expression all over her face.

‘What’s wrong, Fi? You’ve just had a break.’ She marched alongside me, few steps ahead, and then said:

‘Don’t talk to me, Edward.’

I paused. She never called me Edward. ‘What have I done now, then?’ I asked sarcastically. She stopped on the spot. Even with the loudness of chatter and clutter from inside the department I heard her words plainly. Fiona turned to face me, scowling.

‘You broke my heart. You’re not breaking Jasmine’s.’ Anger exploded inside me. I was stressed and wilting enough as it was.

‘How do you know Jasmine?’ I demanded to know, dreading the answer; something from Facebook or Twitter?

Fiona’s scowling tapered off. For a moment I was reminded of how elegant and attractive she was. I could have told her that, but she wouldn’t have listened. I did like her a lot. I like a woman with black hair and blue eyes. Her face was a gift to awake next to in the morning.

‘She’s my little sister,’ and the frowning returned, ‘so back off.’ Fiona walked off back to the resus department. I stood there, thunderstruck and confused. That cannot be true. *This* cannot be true.

That’s who she reminded me of. Fiona.

Then I realised Taylor is quite a common surname. As I pushed the trolley back into majors into the cubicle where it belonged, I pictured the resemblance between Jasmine and Fiona. I flattened out the mattress, gave it a quick wipe down and applied the brakes. Similar faces, similar textures of their hair. I learnt later that Fiona dyed hers black.

I had to talk to Jasmine.

I managed to convince her to come round the following day after she finished her shift. I had a couple of days off so I had plenty of time to get this right. We communicated via text and much to my relief the spark was still there. I opened the door to see her standing outside in her green uniform, worn-down from work; the circles under her eyes were dark, and the smile she gave me was tired. She came into my room and took her little black trainers off, placed her purse on the floor.

‘I know your sister isn’t fond of me,’ I began. Someone had to bring it up. She turned to face me and sat down on my bed. Through a yawn, she said:

‘It doesn’t matter what she said. We’re not that close, anyway, me and Fi.’ I was surprised and pleased to hear that.

‘Look, whatever she said –’

‘Edward, it’s okay. I can make my own decisions. She’s never liked that about me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s always been controlling of me. She’s domineering most of the time.’ I edged closer to her, hands in my jean pockets. ‘We’ve never really got on.’

‘It’s a shame to hear that.’

‘Well, she’s my sister, but that doesn’t mean I have to like her.’

‘Your sister is a lovely person. If you must know we dated about five years ago. As far as I know she’s in a relationship now.’

‘Yes, she is. Ed, she just doesn’t want to see me happy. There’s always been that rivalry between us.’

‘I would like to see you happy.’ I joined her on the bed.

I lay on top of her, kissing her neck and close to her ear. I started to grind lightly. She groaned and our kisses became wetter and faster. We didn’t have sex the other night and I was certain tonight would be that night. She clawed my back and eventually pulled my tee-shirt off, throwing it onto the floor. I looked down on her, aroused and ready to take her uniform off. I lowered and went to kiss her lips –

Jasmine screamed. It pierced my ears and forced me to back off. She didn’t move. Her hands were over her eyes, suggesting something.

‘What? What is it?’ I freaked out. The tension crumbled there before me into something unexpected. In a state of shock, wide-eyed, she said:

‘What’s that on your shoulder?!’

From the moment Jasmine fled that night I was trapped, failing to comprehend what had happened to me. I considered going to a doctor, but it was too embarrassing and would become widespread in the local papers and ultimately become a newsflash at the hospital.

That's the next hindrance I had to overcome, going back there. The problem with that environment is it's a gossip zone; a bitching region; a moaning district. Everyone listened, participated.

I feared bumping into Jasmine. Suddenly I went from longing to see her to wishing I would *never* see her –

Fiona. She would hear the story and spread the news. The only swing of hope I could reach and cling onto was that no one would believe Jasmine's story.

I stepped into Becket Ward for the first nightshift.

Precipitously my life changed. Every turn, left or right, every step, up or down, every movement that thing was there on the front of my shoulder. I was sent to Becket Ward to do a transfer and wanted to refuse, but I had no choice. It's my job. When I approached the reception I could see nurses casting strange glimpses at me, either from the bays or in passing. A part of me wanted to show them my new feature, shock them and send each nurse running. Instead I ignored the glimpses and tried to forget it was there.

It was on my shoulder. It wanted to be stared at in horror and disbelief. It started to have a life of its own. I could feel it, *see* it.

Suddenly, I didn't belong to the NHS. I wasn't a porter.

I wasn't human.

The shift got worse later. I reluctantly wandered into A&E to do a transfer and bumped into Fiona. She cast me the dirtiest look like I was scum of the earth, giggling as she ignored me, satisfied with the pain I was suffocating in. As I waited at the reception for the nurse to finish photocopying the patient's notes, I could see her whispering and nodding towards me with the nurse she was speaking to. Other nurses popped in and out behind the curtains of the cubicles, giving me sickened peeps. Some squinted in the distance. I became the headline of a circus show.

After I finished the transfer I stormed into the closest male staff toilets which were situated at the west wing lifts. It was empty, dirty and

warm. I unbuttoned my shirt. Normally when I wear that blue shirt I felt confident and pally. Now I felt insecure, *too* insecure.

I pulled the shirt down over my right shoulder.

A small, black, oval shaped eye. Somewhere inside there was a malevolent force watching me. It wanted everyone to see it. When I first noticed it the other night, the pupil was red. I didn't sleep well that night, but when I awoke the pupil had faded. There was no iris to it, just a darkness that swallowed me up. I didn't blame Jasmine for freaking out and running.

I shivered. Pulled my shirt back over my shoulder and buttoned it up.

It was gone.

But it was there.

It was there and watching me.

I managed to get home at six in the morning. Stephen would be up soon enough for work. I didn't have the guts to tell him about the china chipping. It was not an option to tell him or even worse, *show* him the eye. Fatigued, sad and confused, I got into bed, boxers and tee-shirt on.

I couldn't sleep. Dawn would soon become morning beyond those blinds in the outside world; a world I was not a part of. I kept getting images of that eye through my darkened vision. It was torment.

Impulsively I threw off the bed sheets and went to the kitchen. I pulled the cutlery drawer open and removed the sharpest knife I could find. Then I opened the cupboard closest to me and grabbed a packet of plasters. I kept telling myself not to do it, but I had to. No choice. I couldn't live like this.

I sat down on my swivel chair next to my desk and took off my tee-shirt. I took a deep breath. I grabbed the knife by the handle, trembling, and pointed the blade towards my shoulder; the tool glimmered with danger. Just before I made contact, I saw the small drum sitting on my windowsill. I looked at the chipped piece of china which no longer belonged to it, looked at the black eye upon me and started to comprehend that there might be a connection here.

No, that was absurd. Anyway, Stephen said it was to bring you good luck, believable or not.

Yes, but this had happened after the china broke.

It said good luck must be handled with greater care.

That's got nothing to do with this.

And you haven't handled luck with care.

Then what the hell is *this*?!

I went for it.

As I brought the blade closer to the eye, the pupil slowly appeared; an even smaller red circle than the eye itself. I shuddered more, feeling the full weight of its glare, angry at what I was about to do. As the tip of the knife made contact, I felt a force pushing it away, a field of repelling magnetism.

Grimacing, resisting the urge to scream, I pushed harder and managed to pierce my skin, which felt like a horrid pinch. Blood trickled out across my shoulder, pain began to build and build, but I had to keep going.

I closed my eyes. Shut them hard. Tears trickled. Sobs followed.

Never had I experienced such pain.

I pushed the knife in deeper, the blade doing its job, and my shoulder exploded into waves of excruciation. Blood went everywhere. The more I dug, no matter how little, sent further agony. Suddenly, a pounding headache came, and I started sweating, my vision blurry.

CONCENTRATE.

I carved round the edges of the eye –

CONCENTRATE.

Attempting to flick out this thing –

CONCENTRATE.

That had grown on and inside me. I could feel it loosening, shrivelling, losing power; blood dribbled onto the floor.

I'm going to faint –

ONE LAST DIG!

I screamed through gritted teeth.

It plopped on my desk, covered in blood. There was a small hole now, revealing deep flesh and a bloody wound which stung and throbbed unbearably. I opened up the packet of plasters, panicking, and slapped on several.

I exhaled a massive sigh of relief. There was blood all over my shoulder and floor. My two normal eyes were drawn to the black eye on my desk. Using my thumb and index finger I managed to pick it up. It was so small and gungy. The red pupil started to fade –

Dead...

I clasped it. Urgently I left my bedroom, walked to the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet. The rawness of the pain still throbbed over my right shoulder, but the worst of it was over. I found an open packet of Ibuprofen on the kitchen counter, popped two out, grabbed a glass and downed each one with a swig of water.

Now I could sleep well.

Now I could return back to work as normal tonight.

When I awoke at midday I felt like I had awakened from a long, gruelling nightmare. I slowly blinked and saw the ceiling come into view, each blink helping. Perhaps it was just a bad dream. Jasmine didn't exist. The eye never existed. Fiona was still my girlfriend. She didn't have a little sister. I yawned, went to stretch –

Ouch. Felt something tender across my shoulder.

Then I remembered Jasmine did exist. Using a knife I cut out the eye off my shoulder last night. That eye *had* been there; small and black, ugly and uncanny.

I drowned in reality then.

Once I was out of bed I noticed the red marks on my top. I pulled the tee-shirt down my right shoulder and saw several plasters. Blood stained the

edges of the plasters, areas of my shoulder still a faded red. I went to lift my arm again and the tenderness still cried out, reminding me not to move it.

I had to see something.

I peeled off the plaster and felt immediate relief. Yes, there was a wound there, deep and pink, like a tiny hole in the ground, but no abnormal body part there to keep me scared and trapped. I removed the plaster, scrunched it up, and chucked it into the small bin under my desk.

Soon I would have a scar. A reminder of what happened. But a scar is not a bad thing. It resembles a moment. And this moment would retell when I expunged the bad thing and returned to work to regain pride and measured contentment.

I will never capitulate to others' derision.

Whilst I slapped on a couple of new plasters I glanced at the small drum. It must have been tiredness getting a better grip of me than actuality because for a moment I swore I heard whispers; murmurs of unknown words disturbing the silence.

I went straight to the bathroom to wash off the last of the horror.

Considered cancelling my nightshift, but instead a relentless determination marched me back there. Once a scab formed I could prove to Jasmine it wasn't what she thought it was, just her imagination getting the better of her. The soreness decreased throughout the duration of the day, but the continual discomfort surged me on. Tiredness hit me hard here and there. I was human again.

When Stephen returned from work later that afternoon, he told me he hadn't got the promotion. I could see the disappointment in his face, and I didn't want to be responsible for adding further bad news by showing him the chipped china. A dark cloud of guilt hung over me whenever we spoke, but I had to delay the inevitable of telling him a little longer.

The hospital came first.

Like most nightshifts it started busy. Martin radioed me after I completed changing a couple of oxygen cylinders up on Ditchling Ward. There was a deceased patient on Becket Ward. It was possibly time to see Jasmine, reignite the spark we'd started.

I met my charge-hand Martin at the east wing lifts. Martin's a lot older than me, walking and talking evidence of how twenty five years in this job can make you bonkers. I pressed the button for the lift.

'What a disastrous start,' he said, puffing and panting, his cheeks reddened. The lift doors opened, we stepped inside. 'I'm a curse.'

Doors closing...

The ground floor disappeared as the doors slid shut. We descended.

'I wonder what other vampires are out of their coffins tonight,' Martin said, giggling.

'There's a nurse on Becket Ward I'd like to see.'

'Uh-huh. Got your eye on someone?'

Eye. I hated that word.

Lower ground floor...

I briefly caught my reflection from his big, rounded glasses. For a second I could see eyes all over my face, little black ones –

'I've got more than an eye on her,' I said, shaking that image off.

Doors opening...

Martin stepped out into the faintly lit basement and grabbed the stretcher. It was long and sturdy, similar to most trolleys, but a thick, blue sheet hung over the top of it.

'I'll do all the work, then!' Martin said, pushing the trolley closer.

'You are the boss!' I replied, gripping one end.

Up we went.

When we arrived at Becket Ward I saw the back of Jasmine in the end bay, putting dirty linen in linen cages. I suddenly got a little excited; hopeful that time could be reversed. The head nurse pointed to the same bay where

Jasmine stood. Martin asked where the notes and notification of death certificate were, which turned out to be in front of us on the reception desk.

‘Just making sure you’re on the ball,’ Martin said. ‘We can see you’re not doing your job properly,’ he added, tapping on the NOD certificate. He laughed, and the nurse chuckled, more so from being uncomfortable.

‘C’mon, young Ed, let’s go.’

The bay was dark when we entered, almost matching the darkness outside the windows. Jasmine jumped when she saw me. I grinned.

‘Is this your fault, then?’ Martin said to her, gesturing towards the closed curtains as we pushed the stretcher inside. Jasmine didn’t respond. All she did was glance at me, and then left. I turned and watched her leave; a despairing bubble of disappointment popped in the pit of my stomach.

Martin looked at me. ‘These youngsters don’t understand me.’ I wandered towards the end of the bay and grabbed us a pair of gloves each.

Martin and I quickly closed the rest of the cubicle curtains; most of the male patients dozed and snored, tucked up under their blankets and sheets. At peace, I thought.

‘You freaked that girl out,’ Martin whispered, pulling back the closed curtains where the deceased lay. I pushed the stretcher inside, closed the curtains behind me.

‘We dated,’ I said, bluntly.

‘You must have done something wrong for her to walk out like that!’ he joked, his smile beaming.

‘I’ll get her back,’ I said, resolutely.

The body was enclosed inside a thick, white body bag. Underneath was a standard white sheet. We levelled the height and position of the bed and stretcher as best we could, kicked down to apply the brakes on both. Me at the foot of the bed, Martin at the head, we removed the thick blue sheet, and both placed one of the long, metal bars to one side.

‘Don’t drop him,’ Martin said. ‘On three...’

We slid him over, a slight bump when he hit the stretcher. We both grabbed the metal bar –

Thud.

The bar hit the deceased's feet. Martin tried not to laugh out loud.

Shockwaves electrocuted me. I had a firm grip of the bar and somehow it slipped out of my grasp, as if it melted away. I looked up at Martin who was still chuckling to himself. He gave me a thumbs up.

I reached down and grabbed the bar and put it back on properly. We unfolded the blue sheet back over, made sure it was stuck down on both sides, and left.

I pushed the stretcher past reception whilst Martin steered. He stopped so we could grab the notes and NOD. Martin placed them upside down upon the blue sheet. Jasmine sat there, ignored me.

'Cheer up, love,' Martin said to her. 'Almost home time.'

No response.

We left.

The basement was long and narrow. Lengthy, fluorescent lights illuminated each turn and corner. The floors were squalid, cluttered with big, metal cages filled with dirty linen, spare or broken furniture, wide, ugly waste bins, too, clustered to one side. Down here beneath the ground level of the hospital the air was warm and stale. That distinctive odour of mould and mildew filtered up my nostrils as we reached the north wing of the basement, heading for the mortuary.

Martin kept nagging me for answers, but I said little about Jasmine. I tried to stop thinking about her. I was down in the basements, down in the dumps, literally. He swiped us in through the first set of double doors. I pushed and manoeuvred the stretcher inside. Martin opened the second set of double doors which slowly closed behind us.

A scent of cleaning chemicals and disinfectant lingered inside here. To our right the embalment room doors were shut and sealed from the world.

To the left, past the baby fridge, was another door which led to the out of hours office where the notes were kept. I heard Martin walk back out as I looked for a spare fridge number; this morgue could hold over eighty deceases. It was pretty full up, small white cards on show below each fridge number. I managed to find an empty one.

‘Right, young Ed. You do the paper work; I’ll put him to rest.’

‘I feel sorry for the men who have to put you away,’ I said, grabbing the NOD off the stretcher.

‘So do I. I’ll be burping and farting the whole time.’

I chuckled and walked through another set of double doors which were hidden round the corner at the end of the morgue. I could hear Martin using the trolley, pulling out the stainless steel plate where the bodies lay.

I began writing down the details from the NOD onto an admission sheet and a small white card. Dealing with the deceased took my mind off everything, scribbling down another human’s details –

I felt an awful tautness across the front of both my shoulders. Muscles stretched, twisted, tightened. Something was trying to poke through, piercing my skin. I ignored the pain and completed the paper work.

When I left the room Martin slammed the fridge door shut. I handed him the small white card.

‘Time for a cup of tea before this bloody bleep goes off again,’ he said.

We both grabbed one end of the stretcher –

Suddenly all the fridge doors swung open, revealing glimpses of the deceased. Martin screamed first. I’ve never heard the man scream before and I never want to hear it again. His screech echoed throughout the morgue, the bowels of the hospital.

‘JESUS CHRIST!’ Martin jumped out of his skin.

‘WHAT THE HELL!’ I shrieked like a little girl.

What on earth just happened?

‘My chest, Christ, my chest –’

'Are you okay?!' I said, letting go of the stretcher and attending to him.

'I think I've shat my pants.'

'Let's get out of here!' I said, no, *demanded*.

'We can't leave the morgue in this state, Edward! Give me a hand to shut them. *Then we leave!*'

We both scrambled up and down, closing the fridge doors one by one. I tried to ignore what skin, hair, or limbs were on show due to the lack of cover from the sheet –

BLEEP BLEEP BLEEP.

'Oh, fuck off!' we both blurted.

BLEEP BLEEP BLEEP.

A monotone tone through our beepers said: *CARDIAC ARREST, A&E RESUS.*

'You're not attending that until we're finished down here!' Martin ordered. Once all the doors were closed I fled.

I ran down the basement, gained greater speed with each step.

Left.

Right.

Up the stairs.

Out onto the ground floor.

But before I headed to resus I ran into the nearest staff toilets.

Still shaking, breathless, I tried to unbutton my shirt to see what I thought I would and prayed I wouldn't see.

When I pulled my shirt down I could see an obvious darkness under the plaster.

No, no, no –

This cannot be happening

No, no, NO –

I peeled off the plaster.

There it was. The eye had grown back. It blinked at me, frowned, the red pupil moving from the centre to its left, over and over again.

'WHAT ARE YOU!' I cried, amidst the horror and disbelief. Repeatedly it kept moving, centre to left still.

Suddenly I realised what it wanted *me* to see.

I completely removed my shirt. It landed on the tiles of the floor.

On the front of my left shoulder had grown another eye, identical to the first, small and black. A red pupil appeared; a dot within the shadow of the monster I was becoming. The pupil slowly moved from the centre to the right, acknowledging its friend.

I stared into the mirror.

I was born with two eyes. Now I had four: two normal, two abnormal.

I could feel the room shrinking round me and all that remained was me within the darkness, camouflaging the two abnormal eyes, red pupils glowing, leaving only my two normal eyes on show.

I dropped my radio and bleeper which crashed onto the ground. I left my shirt on the floor inside the toilet. I was no longer a porter. I was no longer human.

I ran through the hospital, screaming, until I was out, into open space and now abnormal surroundings. I ran back home.

When I stumbled into my bedroom the first thing I saw was the small drum. That piece of china brought me no good luck whatsoever. Insanity seeping in, I picked up the drum and smashed it hard against the opposite wall. It crashed, shattered into several pieces. The top of the drum had caved in.

I stared at the broken pieces –

Now I watched in horror as all the pieces floated up into the air to become its original shape, cracked and ruined. I peered down, left, and then right, to see the eyes squinting with utmost concentration.

The broken china fell and crumbled onto the floor.

There was a knock at the door.

'Eddie?'

Another knock.

Please go away, Stephen. Go away.

'Eddie? I thought you were at work? I heard something smash?'

No, no, don't say that. Please don't say that.

The ceramic piece of china was now completely destroyed. I watched in fear as the door flung open –

But then it smashed shut to a horrible crash. Then the door slowly came forward –

And again, it slammed shut.

Then again; finally it stopped. Silence on either side of the door.

I awoke the next morning to discover my entire eye lashes had fallen off, confirming the nightmare. Stephen kept asking questions and I refused to give him an answer. Eventually he drifted away.

Suddenly, there was a sharp, stinging pain at the tip of my penis. It throbbed several times until I pulled down my underwear, then my foreskin –

I saw the greatest horror of all. The head of my penis had changed into an eye, similar to the two upon my shoulders; a small world of darkness swallowing me whole, the red dot signalling life. I gawked at the eye in blind shock, but a hard tug of reality pulled me closer as I continued to watch the monster I had become.

I'm no longer Edward Marshall.

The Impact of Personal Poetics on a Horror Writer

'It's not that the old stories are necessarily the best stories; rather that the old stories are the *only* stories. There are no new tales, only new ways to tell...' – Clive Barker.

Introduction

The aims and intentions of this research thesis are to investigate the relationship of personal poetics and the horror writer. Firstly the definition of horror must be considered, as an art form and as a philosophy, discussing its position as a genre and its influences in our perceptions of reality. I shall also discuss the creative writer in relation to the horror genre, reflecting upon Sigmund Freud's ideas, having made a correlation between certain theories and my own work. I will then measure the impact and the power of horror fiction, and how this can influence a horror writer. It's vital, too, to explore the origins of the short stories from *Fresh Blood* and how we create ideas, recognizing the concept from sources including blogs and texts from acclaimed horror writers such as Stephen King and Clive Barker. Poetics will be referred to continuously and later explored from a personal level, using the short stories I've submitted as examples and explanations of why and how I write what I write, culminating a discussion as to why I write horror.

What I hope to achieve from this research thesis is an identification of what poetics and the horror genre mean to me as an aspiring horror writer, as well as addressing certain issues which I believe to be important to the genre.

Originally I intended to create a new subgenre for horror, but throughout the duration of this study I understood the significance of

research, how we approach the idea of learning and how we evolve from what's already been written in the field.

Throughout the years the horror story has continued to evolve and subvert its core function which is not only to install fear, but to also question the reader's morality and beliefs, exploring the darker side of humankind. There are notable landmarks of horror writers throughout the history of the genre: H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allen Poe, Stephen King, Clive Barker, Joe R. Lansdale, and more recently, John Connolly – I name these horror writers because of their influences on the horror genre.

Horror is powerful, compromising of intense fear, shock and disgust. Fear is universal throughout humankind; it's an integral part of our daily lives. Shock and disgust are tangled on the inside and outside of fear. Wisker (2005, p.4) makes us simply aware that "Horror is pretty much everywhere. Horror is entertaining and educational."

I argue that's how we as horror writers integrate personal experiences into our own stories, a mixture of reality and imagination. Wisker (2005), p.5) is also mindful that "Horror is in everyday reality, but it is also a genre, a construction, and a representation of what terrifies and disgusts, what we fear and secretly desire."

I agree with these points especially; how the horror we write is a representation of what we fear and secretly desire because those fears fuel what we write and those desires help us recognize the themes we explore. Horror as an effect is arguably a symbol of fear which supports Renehan (2013, p.9) who proposes "What is the haunted house after all but a symbol for the haunted mind?"

Being exposed to and confronting fears in a safe place is the function of the horror story, creating an emotional response in its reader. This is worthwhile investigating because the impact of that emotional response can inspire, determine and shape the practice of a horror writer when constructing their own stories; I shall use examples from my own

experiences when discussing the origins of stories I've written for *Fresh Blood*.

If horror is an emotion ultimately evoked by fear, then I argue that readers must take pleasure and satisfaction from being frightened. Carroll (1990, p.15) refers us back to the title with "The horror genre, however, is essentially linked to a particular affect – specifically, that from which it takes its name." This is a simple, but accurate observation. Wisker (2005, p.38) highlights the response to horror fiction as "We read horror for entertainment, shock, the enjoyment of being scared and thrilled." I agree readers like to be frightened, but subversion is important to the horror writer, too. Subversion allows us to experience those emotions of being scared and thrilled because we're involved in something which is considered to be 'abnormal'. Renehan (2013, p.4) reflects that "Fear is a wonderful reminder that we are indeed alive." This relates back to the argument that we *enjoy* to be scared, but in a safe environment. Gilliam (2007, p.63) supports this with "Readers want to be taken to someplace they haven't visited – or perhaps someplace they've visited before and enjoyed."

To elaborate on subversion, Barker (2001) states the following: "Why... do I put such a high value upon subversion? There are many reasons. The most pertinent here is my belief that fantastic fiction offers the writer exceptional possibilities in that direction, and I strongly believe a piece of work...should be judged by how enthusiastically it seizes the opportunity to do what it can do *uniquely*."

I argue the subgenres of horror are indeed subversions, perversions and transgressions of us: psychological horror is a subversion of the human mind. Body horror is a subversion of the human body. Supernatural horror is a subversion of humankind. This means that we observe what's labelled as 'normal' and use subversion to produce something 'abnormal'. Subversion is an imperative rebellion for our own imaginations.

This argument relates to another key word of the pleasure of reading horror fiction – security. Security can be another powerful emotional response in a horror reader when the status quo is resurrected and the transcendence to rise above defeats evil; ‘abnormal’ is returned to ‘normal’. This relates to Wisker (2005, p.29) who explains that:

“Horror’s potential for both enjoyment and critique resides in its subversion and its ironizing tendencies, its exposure of alternatives, its destabilizing of the stable, and its defamiliarisation of the completely familiar.”

If the function of the horror story is to generate an emotional response in its reader then exploring subversion and loss of security can provoke that reaction.

I’m aware horror writers could be perceived differently because of the darkness we create internally and externally for our characters, forcing the readers to encounter shocking and repulsive fears that no ‘normal’ human would willingly participate in. For example, I argue Stephen King is such a prolific writer for the reason that there’s *nothing* he’s afraid to write about; *Pet Sematary* (Stephen King, 1983) explores raising the dead; also the death and unholy resurrection of a child. However, there are certain issues and concepts I’m afraid to write about; animal cruelty, child abuse, and the end of humankind, because I’m *too* scared of what I’d imagine, or would be disturbed by how easily I wrote about it. Nevertheless, I maintain the opinion that in order to evolve as horror writers we must push the boundaries and face the fear of writing those fears – which *could* form the basis of a story.

Before I started writing *Fresh Blood*, which is a collection of short horror stories, I made myself aware of what was required: few characters and sticking to one point of view, following the conventional structure of the short horror story and being mindful of timeframe. I find these elements to be important to a horror short story writer because it allows a degree of control of the narration, discovering the darkness and keeping that darkness on the page. Carroll (1990, p.99) clarifies one example, *The Complex*

Discovery Plot as “This plot structure has four essential movements or functions. They are: onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation.”

A writer is always learning, mastering new techniques, improving as a storyteller, becoming a conscious editor. I shall explore the progression I’ve made as a horror writer and the impact fictional and horror practitioners sources – those who have studied the art of the horror genre – on someone whose desire is to attain some degree of mastery within the horror genre.

Poetics as a concept carries immense meaning and the challenge of understanding this concept is one of the motivations behind the intentions of this thesis, connecting personal poetics to my own writing. The basic definition of poetics can be understood as the study of linguistic techniques in poetry and literature, but to dig deeper it can impact a writer more evocatively. Aristotle (1996, p.x) reminds us that “In general, the ability to do something well does not depend on understanding, nor does understanding necessarily imply an ability to do it well.” Furthermore, I’m now aware that poetics can influence how we read work such as fictional and practitioners sources; taken aboard certain concepts and understandings. According to Robert Sheppard (2000) “Poetics could shape the way we read work.” This became evident to me because whenever I read a short horror story I instinctively had one eye reading for pleasure, the other eye on the structure, conscious of *The Complex Discovery Plot*, analyzing and learning – and *how* to make that relevant to my own writing. Examples such as this will be discussed throughout this thesis.

Considering the popularity of common horror themes and issues such as the oldest and strongest fears, the unknown and death, it’s even more challenging for an upcoming writer of any particular genre to produce something new and original in a saturated market; something which is different, introduces a new element of that particular horror. For example, it’s bold to declare and create a new fear, but it’s possible to create a *fresh*

perspective of fear which applies to the themes I've explored throughout *Fresh Blood*.

As a horror writer it's my job to be educated in how to make horror horrifying. This involves extrapolating from a modern, insecure society in a modern, fragile world, attempting to establish *fresh* perspectives of fears for readers.

The Definition of Horror

Horror is iconic as a genre and as an emotion. What it stands for must be ironed out. Kilpatrick (2007, p.172) simply acknowledges that “Horror is an emotion, extreme and shocking.” This is a simple and precise opinion. Winter (2007, p.125) is almost as clear with “Horror is not a genre. It is an emotion.” A lot of acclaimed horror writers appear to agree that horror is an emotion, but don’t agree that it’s a genre. To support this, Clive Barker (2006) stated “I think we should cancel the word genre, I think we should throw the word genre out.”

I think the issue with the word genre stems from the debate as to whether horror is a conservative genre. Arguably horror explores conservative themes; for example, disrupting the order of society and reinforcing what could be considered ‘old-fashioned’ ideas, showcasing worst-case scenarios – ultimately, the effects of change. I consider because of society and its tendencies to label, even such texts, which are recognised to us as horror fiction, horror writers are afraid of being branded, and I believe this is where the argument lies – reflecting upon the horror writer as an individual – and whether the horror writer observes horror to be a conservative or liberal genre.

It’s important to take into consideration, too, the effects of the publishing industry because the success of horror authors, such as Stephen King created a new platform for the horror genre; a brand of fiction, which suddenly created a new set of identities and formulas which other horror writers wanted to mirror and replicate. It could be argued at this point horror lost its identity of an emotion – and was defined as a genre because of the success it produced for horror writers and publishers. Just as personal

fears change over time so will the definition of horror from writer to writer, person to person.

I agree horror is an emotion; intense, strong and powerful, but I don't agree it's not a genre. Genre allows identification and knowledge, allows us to pick and choose where a particular story belongs. Genres are unique. The term 'genre' is there for a valid reason.

If horror is not a genre then subgenres wouldn't exist. It appears from acclaimed horror writers that the idea is to have a division where using genres as a platform allows us to categorise texts, therefore allowing industries to identify texts and sell them to readers. There are several subgenres involved within horror; psychological horror, body horror, supernatural horror, just to name a few subgenres I've written in for *Fresh Blood*. Then there's domestic horror, slasher, ghost stories. Each subgenre has its own codes and conventions, but under the surface the aims are still the same: to unfold a darker side of humankind, installing fear and what I value as noteworthy, *excitement* into its readers, and facing that fear is the core of the horror story.

The function of horror and narration coincide, inseparably. Without the notion of storytelling, written or oral, genres would not exist, including horror. The art of storytelling provides a platform for horror writers to create texts (and of course this applies to all genre writers): description, characters, dialogue, and subtext. The horror genre allows horror writers to follow the codes and conventions, but I will remark that those codes and conventions need to break in order for the genre to evolve, which also coincides with the writer's ability to improve and progress. Ultimately, it's a responsibility for the horror writer to challenge codes and conventions and to investigate how they could evolve in the future. The horror genre provides this nature of flexibility and rebellion. Of course horror subgenres overlap and challenge the specific title they sit under, but subgenres offer that flux and freedom which is needed. That's motivation in itself.

Robert Sheppard (2000) argues that “Poetics can never offer readings of the writer’s literary works. He or she cannot read his or her own work as a critic.” I propose a reason for this is because of the emotional connection between the writer and the text; it’s harder to critique objectively when the text is so personal. However, if there’s no platform for a writer to recognise and understand critiquing, then there would be no elements of ‘self-critiquing’ which would surely delay progression. I argue a writer is their own worst critic; after all, it’s *their* work which is so personal. If poetics doesn’t allow the writer to be critical of themselves it’s because they don’t know how to critique – an area which practitioners sources fail to highlight and stress. If something isn’t recognised (such as poetics) or in this case encouraged than something cannot be learned.

There’s a distinct connection between horror and genre, though it appears to be vague. If horror is an emotion, than the genre doesn’t exist; if horror is a genre than it’s an emotional genre. Carroll (1990, p.160) articulates “This paradox amounts to the question of how people can be attracted by what is repulsive.” It’s essential to understand that attraction and repulsion are arguably the success of the horror as a *genre*, and if horror is just an *emotion* then it can’t be responsible for the success of the genre because other genres could be considered to be invested in emotion.

It’s important to highlight as well that Carroll (1990, p.164) believes “That is, a horror story that provokes awe would (probably) be a very good horror story.” Therefore, I reason the emotion of awe is just as imperative as the emotion of fear. Emotion can mean so much in regards to horror. Carroll (1990, p.167) also states “Being thrilled, even frightened (albeit aesthetically), it might be said, relieves the emotional blandness of something called modern life.” I consider this is the appeal of the horror genre; it’s the attraction of *both* genre and emotion, whilst reflecting upon society and human tendencies.

I think we, as horror writers use the horror genre as an opportunity to possibly forget our state of mind at present and channel what could be our stress, loss, sadness, and grief into our writing. That's the beauty of horror writing; we use 'horrible' personal experiences to create our own worlds and stories; ultimately it does become a form of release. When we're in that 'self-hypnosis' state, anything could be written. I think once a horror writer dedicates their time and energy to writing horror fiction they feel involved in what is a genre which provides a source of identification and consequently satisfaction – this is who *I* am, this is what *I* believe to be true, this is what *I* want to say.

As Stephen King (2000, p.263.) reminds us: "The truth is that most writers *are* needy." Consequently, we as horror writers become a part of the horror genre and that emotion – which could *change* our perception. As writers we are observant and watchful of people and situations. It becomes an instinct of how we *react* to what we *see* and our imagination contributes this.

The Creative Writer In Relation To the Horror Genre

I would like to briefly discuss the creative writer. Freud (2003, p.63) proposes:

“Now, the creative writer acts no differently from the child at play: he creates a fantasy world, which he takes very seriously; that is to say, he invests large amount of emotion in it, while marking it off sharply from reality.”

In relation to horror as an emotion this suggests that if we're investing large amounts of emotion into our writing then the scale of fear *could* be a vast emotion. Also, if the purpose of horror is to inject fear into its reader, then the 'pleasant order of things' must relate to the concept of subversion; alternatives, destabilising, defamiliarisation. I argue that fear, the purpose of horror writing, is the experience of excitement rather than dread or terror; as readers we're attracted to the *physical response* from an alternative reality and perspective either of setting or characters. Of course dread and terror are important, but *anticipation* of knowing what's going to happen next helps us turn the page.

However, horror fiction holds more meaning than just turning the page to see if the monster or protagonist remains alive; it allows us as writers to create a platform where we can channel emotion into a fictional setting revealing our deepest and darkest fears to the readers, and tapping into *their* fears through fictional form. I've read hundreds of horror stories that explore themes I've never been interested in or concerned with, but reading horror allows us to understand the mechanism of writing fear; it also brings our attention to certain topics and issues we've never considered before. What frightens a particular writer might not necessarily frighten a

particular reader, but that reader might well identify with the purpose of that particular story and its significance.

To add to this, Freud (2003, p.26) recognises the connection between the writer and their audience:

“However, the unreality of the writer’s world has important consequences for artist technique: there are many things that afford no enjoyment in reality, but can do so in the play of fantasy, and many excitations that are in themselves painful, but can give pleasure to the writer’s audience.”

To break this down, I propose our ‘artist technique’ relates to our level of craft as horror writers and the ‘important consequences’ are applicable to the narratives we write; we are constantly making decisions with plot because there’s a certain stage in the story we’re aiming to reach. In regards to ‘no enjoyment in reality’ I argue this might stem from the mundane things in life we deal with on a daily basis. When we enter that form of ‘self-hypnosis’ to write we can subvert those mundane things and turn an event or incident into a story, whether we think deeply about it or if it’s an instinctive reaction.

To continue with Freud and his ideas, the ‘play of fantasy’ is simply the horror writer’s imagination and ‘excitations that are in themselves painful’ surely are the fears which we write about. Fear is not an easy thing to write about because it’s so personal and disturbing; therefore it ‘can give pleasure to the writer’s audience’ because we are firstly exposing ourselves, but with creative awareness we can generate an emotional response in our readers. We want our readers to *enjoy* our horror texts.

We as horror readers *know* what we’re reading is fiction, despite investing emotion into the story. However, because of the emotions from the horror writer we’re almost being *told* how we *feel*. I argue if the horror writer doesn’t create an emotion of fear, dread or terror for himself, then the reader can’t possibly respond, especially if horror is heavily linked with creating an emotional response for its readers. It’s simply acknowledged by

Castle (2007, p.85) who stresses “If readers don’t care, they will not give a rap about what the character does or what happens to him.”

How we create sympathy (the sense of *understanding* and *compassion*) within our readers brings me to this proposal: characters can be a representation of emotion. For example, our protagonist can represent the fear itself through reactions to plot events or indeed by becoming the monster. I can relate this to *Fresh Blood* – on several occasions the protagonists and other characters are a *representation* of a particular emotion.

Protagonists can also signify the essence of a story; change, rebellion, victim. What’s interesting is our monster will initially represent overt fears, such as death and destruction, but can also represent what we suppress; again, change, such as physical and mental change or something more disturbing such as an unpleasant memory – which I argue could be the route and core of all our horror stories: a monster can be something more expressive and meaningful. Barker (1986) distinguishes the difference between himself and Stephen King with “But King heals to a great extent by dealing with monsters as though they were alien. I heal by having characters realise that the monsters are part of themselves.”

There are several layers and connotations to a character. It’s not simply the case that a monster represents just evil. A monster can represent *more* than just evil; a reminder of *conflict* within a specific belief; a result of human nature or experiment; a rebellion from society. These monsters we create as horror writers, whether internal or external, are intended figureheads of the genre, allowing readers to identify with the purpose of horror and what it stands for. Bonansinga (2007, p.98) in relation to characters suggests “It’s radioactive, and it spreads from the main character’s mind to the minds of others.” I argue this is relevant from horror writers to horror readers; the art of storytelling is contagious, spreadable from the words on the page to the words used from a writer.

To continue, Freud (2003, p.28) proposes that “Unsatisfied desires are the motive force behind fantasies, every fantasy being a wish fulfilment, correcting an unsatisfied reality.” If that’s the case then one of the reasons for writing horror could stem from the pleasure of reading horror fiction; what and how can I contribute towards the horror genre? If a horror writer is unsatisfied in the real world, then I propose the horror writer must gain *some* satisfaction from attempting to *understand* true horror. Of course, there is a lot of true horror in the world (terrorism, illness, loss) and it’s not *needed*. However, it’s our job as horror writers to explore such darkness through fiction and ask questions: what if this happened to *me*? What could I *write*? Again, this relates to subversion and the pleasure we as writers seek from that, sharing that art with our readers who gain equal satisfaction.

Lastly, I would like to touch on the Freud’s concept of the uncanny; an instance where something can be both familiar yet alien, leaving the sensation of being disturbingly strange. This relates to the state of abjection, too, of simultaneously being attracted yet repulsed by something, possibly an object.

I experienced a strong sense of the uncanny recently when I went to visit my deceased Grandmother in a funeral home. The sense of the *familiar* came from her physical appearance, but simultaneously the sense of *alien* came from her being deceased. Therefore, this created a strange sensation of the deception of being alive and the acceptance of death; a contradiction of emotions – a *separate* emotion which indeed was something I’ve never experienced.

However, when it comes to modern society it could be argued that death is glamourized in television and film, reported in the news on a daily basis; I don’t believe death is glamourized in horror because it’s a universal theme. When death is familiar in this sense of the media, it becomes *unfamiliar* when it becomes personal.

Freud (2003, p.152) suggests that:

“It may be that the uncanny [‘the unhomely’] is something familiar [‘homely’, ‘homey’] that has been repressed and then reappears, and that everything uncanny satisfies this condition.”

In relation to the creative writer I think the uncanny can contribute enormously to our creativity. As horror writers we can create something *familiar* for our readers (universal themes, settings), and the uncanny *can* provide the horror (destabilising, defamiliarisation). The uncanny is the strong sensation of something disturbingly strange, and horror fiction *is* strange – as horror writers we’re constantly attracted to themes and issues we *don’t* understand (ultimately the unknown). Therefore, that *alien* emotion can provide a platform of creativity. We *can* be creative and the uncanny can satisfy this condition for both the horror writer and reader.

The Power of Horror Fiction

Throughout the duration of *Fresh Blood* I've experienced several different kinds of emotional responses caused by several acclaimed authors which I shall distinguish. In regards to the short horror anthologies I've read, I include *Nightshift* (Stephen King, 1978), *Skeleton Crew* (Stephen King, 1985), *High Cotton* (Joe R. Lansdale, 2000), *Bumper Crop* (Joe R. Lansdale, 2004), *Books Of Blood, Volumes 1-3* (Clive Barker, 1984-1985), *Books Of Blood, Volumes 4-6* (Clive Barker, 1984-1985) and *Nocturnes* (John Connolly, 2004). I shall pick a story from each writer and discuss the effects the fiction had on me.

'The Mist', *Skeleton Crew* – after a violent thunderstorm, a father takes his son to the local supermarket where a mist traps them inside with a large crowd of strangers; bizarre creatures appear from inside the mist and start attacking anyone and anything. This wasn't a direct strike at my personal fears, but more so the interaction and tension between strangers was a grim reminder of the darkness of humanity. As a horror writer I want to bring the reader into a sense of reality then completely destabilise the situation, which is what happens here; the uncanny of something familiar such as bugs (from the mist), but the alien of their size, power, and threat to the characters. This story explores themes of isolation and survival, too. It's human instinct to survive, and challenging that in extreme, strange and weird circumstances can be very powerful. In other words, sometimes when I read a horror story it's not the story itself that impacts on me; it's the writing of the author. As Freud (2003, p.154) points out "This suggests that we should distinguish between the uncanny one knows from experience and the uncanny one only fancies or reads about."

As horror writers we're attracted to exploring the darker side of humanity and the uncanny is very much a part of that – creating something familiar, but contributing that strange and mysterious aspect is crucial.

'Incident On and Off a Road Mountain', *High Cotton* – while driving on a secluded mountain road the female protagonist loses control of her vehicle and collides with an abandoned car on the side of the road. Soon she encounters 'Moonface', a deformed serial killer; fleeing into the forest, she runs for her life. There's an appeal to apparent freedom which is then put under threat, something which as a horror reader I take satisfaction from – the excitement of horror. To add to this, monsters come in different shapes and forms and in the case of 'Moonface', the impact was from a creative standpoint; subverting what is considered to be 'human' – and the *human* reaction of that. However, a large part of the emotional response came from the satisfaction of the ending: the twist, which I argue Lansdale writes best – a degree of mystery is indicated at the beginning and not revealed until the final scene.

'Rawhead Rex', *Books Of Blood, Volumes 1-3* - an ancient monster imprisoned underground is accidentally awakened, and goes on a rampage killing and eating people. Unlike 'The Mist' and 'Incident On and Off a Road Mountain' this horror story filled me with dread and terror for various reasons; 'Rawhead Rex' is large and grotesque in appearance, and doesn't speak a word – in regards to the monster installing fear into the reader, I was *physically* disturbed. The beginning gave instant impressions of eeriness and suspense, indicating that humankind can be weak, fragile, and helpless, something which impacted on me greatly. These kinds of stories motivate me to write something just as fearsome, but I was able to take something else important from it: the recognition that monsters are extraordinary characters in our ordinary world. 'Rawhead Rex' was accidentally awakened and was a part of earth, which I interpret as saying that monsters are indeed a part of our world.

'Some Children Wander by Mistake', *Nocturnes* – a ten year old boy is fascinated by the circus which is coming to town. He attends the spectacle with his parents but wanders away from them, curious to find the clowns. Once he discovers a secluded tent, he learns the truth of clowns. This story in particular reminded me of something disturbing; not because of clowns, but because of how children can be intrigued by something, roam to discover the truth and sometimes (in this case) be punished by it. The everlasting horror is revealed at the end with the child slowly transforming into a clown and searching for his parents in the audience through various shows. Again, this struck a chord because children are glued to their parents for emotional support, and the thought of this being stripped away is indeed frightening. We also consider childhood to be innocent, but I think this story questions that thought, and whether children in modern society are indeed innocent.

The impact of reading horror fiction created numerous emotional responses in me; the satisfaction of experiencing subversion, a sense of performing a subversive act, fulfilment from the ending and horror itself. It's vital to read as much different horror fiction as possible because each horror writer will have a dissimilar impression from each other. As Cavelos (2007, p.109) points out "A writer must take various sources of inspiration and filter them through his own unique sensibilities." I propose these various sources must include horror fiction, filtering the emotional response from such horror texts and integrating them into horror readers' experience, through the individual's writing.

Jens (2007, p.65) recognises something different with "Horror is about how people react *when they encounter* the plot." I don't agree that is the sole purpose of horror fiction, but I agree it's a form of horror. I argue we use readers as our protagonists, and ourselves, the writer, as the antagonist; we put our readers into the shoes of the protagonist and put ourselves, for example, into the body of the monster. I propose on a deeper level this relates to horror writers wanting to feel *powerful* by subverting the readers'

reality where they could be considered helpless. Eventually the protagonist experiences the horror of that fear and we want our readers to connect to our main character; therefore, we as the horror writers can get behind the mask of the monster and confront the protagonist, and ultimately the reader. If we can emotionally captivate our readers, installing fear from the monster, then the function of the horror story can be fulfilled – confronting that fear.

King (2000, p.166) recognises “Good writing, on the other hand, teaches the learning writer about style, graceful narration, plot development, the creation of believable characters, and truth-telling.” I agree with these points, but it’s important to identify how other practitioners can teach writers with regard to self-awareness, self-understanding, knowledge and theoretical standpoints – such available sources can be positive.

To finish on poetics, Robert Sheppard (2000) reminds us “Poetics should be written (and read) with an awareness of its function in the creative process.” This is the fundamental aim of this research thesis and what I’m attempting to achieve. Learning is indeed an art, too.

The Origins of *Fresh Blood*

Where we as writers get ideas from is an intriguing discussion and has multiple answers; experience, knowledge, situation, to name a few. Lansdale (2007, p.76) makes it simple with “Write what you truly know.” This is a term used constantly throughout creative writing courses and this is how I interpret it: Write what you know from knowledge and experience. I argue that ultimately that’s what it boils down to – the knowledge of a situation or event which becomes the story, using experience (emotion) to create the characters and start a narration. Knowledge and experience fuse into one and help us create the stories and worlds we do in horror. After all, the characters are a part of *you* and the world is *yours*; translating one’s knowledge and extrapolation.

This of course can grow and change over time with the experience of writing, because as King (2000, p.181) reminds us “I think you begin by interpreting ‘write what you know’ as broadly and inclusively as possible.”

Through the practice of writing horror itself we start to learn more about ourselves (which I shall discuss further under Personal Poetics) and how we create an idea minefield. If we have a specific formula that coughed up a good story, chances are we’ll use that formula again. Sometimes we’ll use different formulas that produce something worthwhile or be fortunate enough for an idea to land straight in our laps. Either way, the experience of getting ideas is an experience in itself and overtime we learn what we as horror writers need to write a horror story.

However, Clive Barker (1988) shared the belief that “The major influences are, I think, also personal influences rather than cinematic or literary influences...” I think what he’s ironing out here is that while cinematic or literary influences *do* have an influence, personal influences are

more important in *what* and *how* we write. I believe as horror writers we're influenced all the time by acclaimed writers and personal experiences. All we need to do is pick up a book or think about a particular event in our lives which means something to us. Of course that doesn't guarantee we're going to want to write, but that desire is always within us – that urge to unlock something deep and dark within us, something that frightens us that might frighten horror readers.

The origins of *Fresh Blood* were simple; combined with integrating personal experiences, a desire to write successful short horror stories resulted in the following:

'Me, Myself and I' – a psychological horror story about a dementia patient suffering the horror of trying to remember his childhood and parenthood.

'The Devil's Theatre' – a supernatural horror story about a man who awakes in limbo; he starts to learn the truth of his whereabouts once he meets Sole, the presenter of what appears to be a show.

'Watch Out' – a body horror story about a hospital porter who becomes cursed when the girl he's dating from work accidentally breaks a china drum given to him by his flatmate.

These are all different subgenres attempting to create a fresh perspective on fear. Having read several short horror story anthologies I wanted to demonstrate the impression these books had on me: I wanted to write *my own type* of horror stories; not King, Lansdale, Barker or Connolly – Matthew Edlin stories (again this shall be discussed further under Personal Poetics). King (2000, p.166) believes that "You cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until it has been done to you." I agree with these sentiments and I have been swept away by several short horror stories from various acclaimed authors. I think it's more likely this can happen when it's an intense piece of horror fiction which does move you in an emotional or inspirational way: can I ever write a piece of horror

fiction that is that good? Can I ever move a horror reader with the same emotions this story gave to me? I argue these are all conscious challenges we seek within ourselves, especially aspiring writers.

Clive Barker (1998) revealed "One of the reasons why I tell my stories, as I mentioned a little earlier, is because they answer some need in myself." This supports the scenario of inflicting your deepest and darkest fears onto horror readers. Raw emotion can be powerful and poignant – one of the reasons why I like writing psychological horror. I like to ask questions about myself and reality, searching for an answer which is never going to be entirely true; a smidgen of some certainty I'll discover if I'm lucky.

To elaborate further, a great horror story can provide the emulate factor, the desire to write, but reading a great horror story doesn't provide us with a great horror idea for ourselves. As writers we're forever conscious of our favourite horror writers and their stories, ironically fearful of replicating and imitation. I agree with Barker that personal experiences are more of an inspiration than entertainment sources because the truth is those personal experiences are *real*. We as horror writers want to return the satisfaction we gain as horror readers.

King (2000, p.79) uses *Carrie* (Stephen King, 1974) as an example when describing ideas: "Two unrelated ideas, adolescent cruelty and telekinesis, came together, and I had an idea."

I take on board this formula of two unrelated ideas as I can apply this to *Fresh Blood* (important note – I'm currently employed at my local hospital):

'Me, Myself and I' – the first idea came from personal experience when I witnessed a dementia patient talking to himself in a cubicle. The second idea was when I asked myself: how can he make sense of the world?

'The Devil's Theatre' – the first idea came from the birth of the antagonist and supernatural Sole. The second idea was where could I put this

character to show him off? When I decided on a theatre set in limbo, the rest glued together.

‘Watch Out’ – the first idea came from personal experience when I entered a department and a seated crowd of strangers stared at me as if I was an alien; I wanted to capture the essence of working in a hospital. The second idea came from the concept of a ceramic piece of china that contains the spirit of a monster. I will flesh this out later under Personal Poetics.

However, I disagree with what King (2000, p.190) implies with “The situation comes first. The characters – always flat and unfeatured, to begin with – come next.” *Fresh Blood* provided a mixture of elements, different triggers. ‘My, Myself and I’: the ideas came from the protagonist. ‘The Devil’s Theatre’: the antagonist came first. Throughout the practice of being a horror writer it’s evident to me that each writer develops a unique hypothesis for their own texts, and it’s important to find the *advantages* of those, but be aware there’s not a definitive answer.

Taylor (2007, p.137) simply acknowledges “A basic truth: People love monsters.” I had a desire to create a monster that could be compared to some of the greatest horror monsters, such as ‘Pennywise the Clown’, ‘Freddy Krueger’, ‘Leather face’. Sole’s appearance, behaviour and supernatural power gives the character that chance. I consider a great monster to have the following (from a creative point of view): iconic outfit, ruthless goals, and memorable lines of dialogue, whilst still delivering fear. ‘Watch Out’ evolved from personal experience again, an uncanny concept landed first. I must mention that this short story was also a rewrite from a university assignment. I was unsatisfied with the first draft of a body horror story and wanted to attempt a new version because as Clive Barker (1998) reminds us: “I think anything you make, almost anything you make, you look back and think, 'I could have done that better' - I think that's right.”

I maintain that an idea can grow from either the characters we create and of course characters can grow from an idea. In addition, ideas can grow from personal experiences.

Integrating personal experience was going to seep through in *Fresh Blood*. I've been committed to working for the NHS and the act of using that experience, mirroring and sharing it was inevitable. I argue that's the case for any writer; King has written extensively about the ups and downs of a successful writer; Lansdale has a passion for martial arts which has been shown in several of his stories; Barker has an interest towards the cycle of sex and death which can be understood from his work.

I would argue that a particular image can contribute towards an idea, too. 'Me, Myself and I' was the case; an isolated environment of a cubicle. 'The Devil's Theatre' came to fruition when I watched an episode of *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, and I decided on a setting where I could bring Sole to life. 'Watch Out' was taken from the imagery of a hospital; departments, corridor, the basement. It's apparent that that *image* can be the route of an idea: a person, an incident or event.

Of course it must be acknowledged that imagination contributes an enormous amount. Imagination allows us to subvert that image we're drawn into, which spits out the idea into a new entity – a monster or a monstrous act. Castle (2007, p.83) proposes "Imagination will give you the idea for a horror story, but you're a long way from having the waking nightmare that will envelop and encompass readers." I think what he's arguing here is imagination is a starting point, and the writer must contribute the rest, which is indeed true. Barker (1987) shares the importance of imagination with "I believe the only tool we have to interpret the world is imagination."

I come to the conclusion that imagination as a tool is a necessary ingredient for a horror writer; we as horror writers are constantly observing and subverting what we see – evident with *Fresh Blood*.

To continue with imagination, Marano (2007, p.53) discusses this: “It was gruelling to confront a thing out of my own mind that had frightened me, but I knew the effort was worth it.” I’ve had similar experiences with *Fresh Blood*, after I’ve finished a story, asking myself literally: what the *hell* was that? Why does this image or idea bother me?

More so I wanted to experience this with different subgenres, some freedom. I wanted to write in a subgenre I was familiar with and to challenge myself in other subgenres I had less experience with. Writing is rewriting, writing is an experience in itself; filling that white blank page with words is a fear in itself. This shall be explored later because I experienced writer’s block long before I started writing *Fresh Blood*. I think for a new horror writer, writing horror allows them to discover fears in themselves and what themes and issues are important to that individual, including what subgenres are most appealing.

Sallee (2007, p.51) shares the reasons for the appeal of psychological horror: “When asked why I write psychological horror, I always reply that this form is the most intimate way to reach a reader. Think about it.” ‘Think about it’ sums it up for me – what’s in the character’s mind? I agree that’s the reason for the subgenre’s uniqueness, but other subgenres can be just as intimate. What I found with writing supernatural horror was truly exhilarating as a horror writer – complete liberation of the antagonist, setting and plot. There was no restriction, which could make it just as intimate for horror readers. ‘Watch Out’ was of a similar vein due to personal experiences, attempting to bring readers into the perspective of working in a hospital, and the concept of body invasion captured several universal fears: insecurities, betrayal, and acceptance.

Personal Poetics

Poetics is a mental piece of clay; it constantly changes shape and form, twists and turns, dents and rebuilds. This happens for a number of reasons: knowledge, experience, and understanding, and eventually maturity and reflection. Our experience of poetics can help us define it more entirely. Our understanding of poetics can help us use poetics as it should be used – individually and to our advantage.

Poetics should be handled with great care; it carries a meaning and that meaning should be used to our strengths. It carries more than one explanation. As Robert Sheppard (2000) stresses to us “Poetics is a discipline, though a flexible one.” That flexibility allows us to embellish our own poetics and enhance their significance. Without poetics it would be a greater challenge to understand ourselves as horror writers and the reasons for producing the stories we do. To echo what Malcolm Heath states at the beginning of *Poetics* (1996, p.viii): “Another reason why the *Poetics* is worth studying closely is the quality of its thought.”

That quality of thought lies in the strength of the concept and allows us as horror writers to reflect and analyse our stories and realise things we never would have noticed; connections. I think that’s the quality of poetics – it’s always a test and trial. Once we begin to understand our own personal poetics it starts reshaping that mental piece of clay; that mental piece of *internal* clay that is used to gain knowledge, experience and understanding allows constant progression because writers should never stop evolving.

Furthermore, it’s important to mention Robert Sheppard (2000) when he proposes that “Poetics says: look back, look forward, look straight ahead, and cross the page.”

The subtle and metaphorical interpretation I take from this is the following: poetics is like crossing the road: look back (to check on your poetics), look forward (to bring your poetics with you), look straight ahead (this is what I trust to be poetics), and cross the page (my poetics will *remain* poetics to me, but I will always be able to take them forward. I'm sure hundreds of other writers would interpret this otherwise; some all entirely, some possibly comparably.

I don't think poetics ever stops changing shape or form. It's there in the front of our minds all the time and it reappears when we ask to it, when we have control over it, when we *need* it to. It's only difficult to understand if we *don't* use it correctly. Therefore, I share the following: Poetics is hidden knowledge and cannot be used until poetics are written; until we rinse out the words, we cannot flatten out the page and understand where poetics are.

Poetics cannot be understood until we know what it *is* to understand poetics: until we understand poetics, we don't know what poetics are *doing*.

Poetics are a part of us, but belong to poetics eventually: poetics are individual, but individuals aren't poetics.

Poetics is emotion; emotion is experience: experience contributes towards our emotions and breathes life into poetics.

These are just several examples described in relation to what personal poetics means to *me*. Again, that's the quality of poetics – we as writers take what we want and can develop awareness because as Robert Sheppard (2000) points out “Poetics steals from anywhere”.

Horror, both as an emotion and as a literary and media interest invaded part of my life when I didn't see it coming. I remember catching a glance of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) as a child. Still to this day I cannot watch the film despite its lack of quality in comparison to modern cinema. Strangely enough I enjoy reading and writing horror fiction, but I cannot *watch* horror films. This could be due to the fact that I'm not

interested in writing scripts for the horror genre. Nevertheless, that *horror* I experienced, that *emotion* was one of such fear that it's locked inside me and I want to leave it where it is: an innocent child.

As I grew older that emotion shrank, but still remains inside and it's that experience that attracted me to the horror genre. That's part of my personal poetics – I was *scared*, so *I want* to scare. It's almost a rebellion: I suffered, so the *reader* can become involved, too, in that suffering. To distinguish why I can't watch horror films and yet can read horror fiction is one word: imagination. The powerful aspect of being a horror reader is what *we imagine*; this is different to what *we're shown*. I don't like to be shown. I like to imagine. Imagination is mine – as is personal poetics.

It's my job as a horror writer to be concerned with the darker side of humanity; destabilising the reader's sense of security and defamiliarising the familiar, exploring concepts of death and destruction, cautious of the unknown. We as horror writers *cannot* teach horror, the emotion, of course, but we can establish what horror fiction is supposed to be about; the power it holds. The effect it has. Ultimately it comes down to a decision. If someone experiences personal horror throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood, why *write* about it?

Poetics has helped me understand why I write horror – it heals something deep and dark inside of me; questions it and hopefully leaves me an answer. Most times there won't be a certain answer. Sometimes I'll understand what I was attempting to write, but there will be no answer; perhaps a suggestion or thought. I argue that as horror writers we're constantly asking ourselves one, prodigious question: *why* does this scare me? And we trap that fear with the one thing that comforts us: the horror story. As Marano (2007, p.53) considers "Freaking yourself out is an occupational hazard for a horror writer."

I think most times we're mindful of what themes and issues we're going to write when we sit down, but sometimes it unfolds at such a pace

we're oblivious of what we're writing until we stop and read it again after some time. Poetics will always have answers, no matter how few.

At first this might be indefinable, but then it can become clear. Once we as horror writers *know*, we can articulate more visibly our fears. Eventually, this relates to the quality of our horror writing. If we as horror writers fully recognise our fears and what that emotion does to us we can turn that fear into something articulate. Lansdale (1998) said the following: "What makes writing work really well isn't the subject matter—though that helps. It's the way the writer puts it down and a good writer can make something normally banal seem interesting."

I think 'banal' comes from the slicing of reality, mundane things, possibly observation of current horror texts and then the rest is up to us as horror writers. However, as horror writers it's important to remember what Lansdale (1998) empathises "For me writing is a passion, not an obsession." Reading and writing horror fiction is a passion; personal poetics gets involved.

I maintain that poetics is emotion; emotion is experience. More recently I've experienced horror which didn't *start* as personal horror, but horror nevertheless, with my job. Throughout my time as a hospital porter I've witnessed some haunting events; paramedics resuscitating a baby; the death of patients after suffering cardiac arrests; attending an emergency bleed for several hours. As I recollect these now it's not the *experience* of the event I'm attracted to – it's the *emotion* that the *experience* provided. In all of these examples it was dread, terror, hopelessness, and helplessness. Those emotions therefore can go toward creating a personal poetics of horror. We identify the strongest emotion and tend to work with it; in 'Watch Out' it was hopelessness, and not for the first time I've experienced this and also written about it.

Horror often explores the inevitable pull towards death. The fear of the unknown is a universal theme, too, but what I've come to understand

from my personal poetics is it's what we as horror writers *choose* from those experiences and emotions to write about: personal horror. Barker (1988) believes:

"What's important, I think, is to be fresh, and also I think to feel as though you're breaking personal ground, because I do very strongly believe that the best sort of fiction is written from personal concern."

Poetics are personal; horror is personal.

Before I started writing *Fresh Blood* I had writer's block. I was *scared* to write, ironically enough because I didn't think I could *do* it. I hadn't written fiction for a long time either – I spent a lot of time during my Creative Writing degree doing scriptwriting. When I studied practitioner's sources I hoped it would help.

I started to gain momentum. I was developing a better understanding and knowledge of the horror genre, and more importantly I was developing a *different* way of *thinking*. I'm not referring to the obvious scenario that the more knowledge of a subject we have the better we can understand it. I'm proposing the more knowledge of a subject we have the more *creative* we can be.

Nonetheless, I still wasn't *writing*. Ideas came into my head, some stayed and evolved ('The Devil's Theatre'), and others disappeared and were buried into that idea minefield. Sooner rather than later I learnt what the problem was. King (2000, p.249) bluntly says: "Writing fiction, especially a long work of fiction, can be a difficult, lonely job."

I think I've finally reached the stage where I've recognised as a horror writer where some of my strengths lie which helped me get going again; I propose that horror writers eventually identify what particular themes and settings their *strongest* at writing. For example, I believe I'm strongest when I'm writing psychological horror through an isolated setting, exploring the theme of solitude. Now this wasn't something planned when I started

writing horror fiction; I *discovered* it. I recognised this, which became something I was familiar and therefore *comfortable* with.

I think the same can be said about some of my personal influences: Stephen King has written plenty about the horrors of being a writer and the horrors of living in a small town. Clive Barker has written a lot about bodily invasion and transformation. Joe R. Lansdale has written abundantly about the horrors of violence. If there's a particular theme or setting horror writers are familiar with the chances are they're going to write about them again; if you've achieved some degree of success, why not write about it again?

But I will stress the importance of complacency. It takes practice and dedication to discover your 'voice' and strengths, mindful of your weaknesses, consciously attempting to become a better writer. When I started *Fresh Blood* I wanted to write a psychological horror story because it's a subgenre I've achieved a degree of success in. However, I was careful not to become repetitious and challenged myself to write in unfamiliar subgenres – to challenge myself, to evolve, and most importantly learn.

As King said, writing fiction can be a lonely job. I was afraid to return to solitude. However, I learned an important lesson through my writer's block: there really is *nothing* to be afraid of. Only what's in your head. Let's see what's inside.

I'm going to attempt to articulate the short stories in *Fresh Blood*. The horror writer is a distinct individual and therefore aims to create horror in distinctive narrations; clearly seeing links between fiction and what concerns the horror writer. If reflected upon it can be horrifying itself, but reassuring because as a horror writer I can *see* and understand what terrifies me.

The purpose of *Fresh Blood* was not necessary to reflect upon modern fears in a modern society, such as terrorism, environment disasters, and global warming. However, a modern fear did become apparent after some time subconsciously, which is surveillance. For example, 'Me, Myself and I': I

is watched from *Myself and Me*. 'The Devil's Theatre': the audience and Sole watch Robert and Mary. 'Watch Out': the bodily invasion of the eyes and Edward's colleagues. I think the fear of surveillance is powerful in modern society; an invasion of privacy and ultimately of judgment. Nevertheless, this was not the intention of *Fresh Blood* – I just wanted to write horror stories, regardless of a modern world.

However, I had writer's block. I *need* headspace which I didn't have. I didn't have anything to *say* – the clearest way to explain this is if I'm not *feeling* anything, I *can't* write. This could be a number of things; the lack of desire to write which coincides with a lack of creativity and fear to write. For a long period of time I didn't believe I could write a horror story. That lack of belief can grow and become suffocating, but suddenly – a burst of energy, came of nowhere because of four simple words: 'Me, Myself and I'. The title came to me from nowhere.

'Me, Myself and I' was a cry for help. It was an expression of grief to me. I've always been attracted to comparativeness, too: the idea of two separate, yet terrifying scenarios and how the dread and terror might differ. For example, I fear the death of my family, but is that fear greater than the fear of dying myself? This was a theme, an internal horror I was battling with at the time. There's something about first person narration which I've always been fascinated and inspired by. I think it's because we're hiding round the corner of our protagonist. What we fear and internally desire is beneath the surface; protagonists are our instruments and we use them to demonstrate our fear. They're our toys in the playground. This is all reflects upon Freud (2003, p.26): "Now, the creative writer acts no differently from the child at play; he creates a fantasy world, which he takes very seriously."

Normally I have a reader in my mind when I'm writing horror, but in this case the reader was me. I had to *accept* life for what it was (we live to die) as well as accepting this is what it takes to be a horror writer. Having not

written horror fiction in such a long time, this emotion was bound to seep through and onto the page. All this can be identified from the very first page:

‘I need to write this down because I can feel time slipping through my fingers and I know the clock will stop ticking soon.’

‘I know I’m getting old, a tad older each time the sun comes up and the sun goes down and the moon comes up and the moon goes down.’

‘I’ve never been so afraid in my life.’

The fear of getting old – that’s what ‘Me, Myself and I’ is about. Again, the horror writer is distinctive and creative in their own unique way. The title came first, then personal experience contributed, forming the nebulous – then, when I *had* something to say, I *wanted* to write, this all came out; an explosion of fear. That’s the strength of first person narration – as a horror writer the words can slip out and form into a story when the headspace is there. I returned to a familiar formula I was comfortable with – psychological horror. Challenging what’s real and what’s not real. That’s the satisfaction I get from writing this subgenre; yes, I’m scared of this, but, I’m not *scared* to write it. How do I see reality? As Clive Barker (1995) admitted “I have to make the most of the time I have on the planet because I want to make sure that I at least make a contribution with the work I do.” That’s the essence beneath ‘Me, Myself and I’ and the motivation as to why I want to become a professional writer.

I also wanted to evoke an atmosphere of confusion inside the cubicle between the protagonist and the staff of the hospital:

‘No one believes me out there.’

‘Those bastards and whores change their faces every day.’

‘There was a noise earlier. Someone knocked on the door, that familiar knuckle on wood, but that happens all the time in this place; whatever this place is.’

‘Still, I don’t know what the hell I’m doing here and what the problem is.’

And the inevitability of death:

‘It’s dark outside and these four walls keep getting smaller, the lights are off but when they’re on they don’t get brighter. I’m curled up under blankets but they don’t get warmer, I’m in bed but it might as well be a coffin. The walls are blue but fade to black, I can’t write so I might as well be dying.’

However, this was all unplanned. I spent several months brewing ideas, most of which were psychological horror; ‘The Devil’s Theatre’ was the exception. However, over short periods of time it was encouraging to be *creative* again despite the lack of horror writing, but I couldn’t integrate personal experiences and emotions into these premises. That’s an enormous part of my personal poetics – again, if I can’t *feel* it, I *can’t* write it.

To elaborate, I’m referring to this concept: unless it’s a world I feel *comfortable* in I can’t be a part of it. This also means the holes and gaps in relation to plot *can* be covered. Then again, as horror writers, how do we feel comfortable in our own worlds we create? I argue it’s because of experience. I was able to discover a formula; taken the internal fear (a combination of getting old and death), integrate it with personal experience (being a general porter), and create the comfort: the horror story. This is also why I *write* horror: there’s a question that needs an answer. That nebulous fear is found, wrestled with, let free – then I feel relieved. This is what I *think* about that – the narration allows that freedom.

Ultimately every horror story has a different purpose; someone *else* (the reader) is taken into account. I’ve always identified it as a letter, a statement, an apology, a diary entry – something *personal*. When we’re writing horror we’re aiming to achieve something – of course, we’re simply attempting to write a horror story, but it’s more personal than that for the horror writer. ‘Me, Myself and I’ was a reminder: this is how you’ve grown; this is how you’ve changed. It was self-assurance. I have the potential to write a horror story that might please potential readers – that’s my

philosophy. I'm never satisfied with what I've written, but this was a start. As Robert Sheppard (2000) highlights "Poetics can appear in the creative work itself, as content, as theme or aside." I argue poetics can be anywhere and everywhere, if the individual *believes* it to exist.

'The Devil's Theatre' provided utmost liberation as a horror writer; the setting, the antagonist, Sole, and the plot. I wasn't aware this would be the case, having never written supernatural horror. The birth of Sole took a couple of years for me to get him out, mindful I wanted to create a unique monster. As King (2000, p.225) reflects "..., but I think you will find that, if you continue to write fiction, every character you create is partly you." There's a lot of *me* in Sole.

Before I started writing *Fresh Blood* I made a conscious effort to work on my description as a horror writer. King (2000, p.201) believes "Good description is a learned skill, one of the prime reasons why you cannot succeed unless you read a lot and write a lot." I do not dispute this; all elements of creative writing are a learned skill. However, I argue from personal experience that certain elements can begin more *natural* than others.

During my experience work-shopping throughout my Creative Writing degree, one writer had a flair for description; one writer had a flair for language; myself, I believe I had a flair for dialogue. I think for an aspiring writer certain skills *can* be stronger than others. This was the case for 'The Devil's Theatre'. I put a lot of effort into the imagery of the setting and Sole, but the skill of dialogue came more naturally. Also, because I found inspiration from *The Jeremy Kyle Show* I wanted to reflect on the public humiliation of vulnerable people, zooming in on an aspect of society where viewers enjoy watching people squirm; the social implications of labelling and judging.

The Devil's Theatre' came more from my heart than my head. There were certain themes and issues I had to address. Again, I was able to use the

formula; the internal fear (failure), integrate it with personal experience (observations from personal life in regards to love and faith), and create the comfort: the horror story, but more so, Sole. That's the advantage of being a horror writer – taking a negative experience and turning it into a positive experience. It's important to mention that Winter (2007, p.127) identifies “What we are looking for is a way to confess our doubts, our disbeliefs, our fears.” I argue that can be through a monster, and/or a setting, eventually through the horror story.

Back to the method of making; in regards to dialogue, King (2000, p.214) recognises “Dialogue is a skill learned by people who enjoy talking and listening to others.” This I agree with and I argue *listening* is the key to writing strong dialogue. Listening to others allows us to learn rhythm, style, shape, and to *recognise* patterns. Dialogue is fundamental – exposes characters and advances plot. In relation to ‘The Devil’s Theatre’ I wanted to flex the dialogue muscle; I *love* writing dialogue. It’s one of the writing skills I take complete satisfaction from. A line of dialogue can capture the essence of our characters. Once we get into their psyche our characters can *talk* for themselves. Having got into Sole’s psyche over time this was the case:

‘It’s about to get a little darker inside here, William Burns.’

‘I never tasted sweeter.’

‘Solitude can drive a man insane.’

‘Shock has no boundaries.’

‘You don’t want to drown in your own tears.’

‘We relish the excruciation of someone else’s misery.’

‘A woman can steal a man’s heart, but a woman can disregard it with all the others until she finds one she likes to hold.’

Several examples echoing the emotion of this particular experience.

Another reason behind the creation of Sole’s character was to reflect society’s power on people, highlighting what I consider to be pressure and decisions:

'I'm just doing my job. And a man must do his job.'

'A man must be vain on his arrival. You might never see him again.'

'An audience needs a show and a show needs an audience.'

'This is business. Business has no patience.'

'I'm no figurehead. This is *my* job. I'm justice.'

Despite ever growing confidence as a creative writer I lost a lot of faith through personal experiences. I tend to find in life reward and punishment goes hand in hand. Similar to accepting the inevitability of death I had the same with God as a child. I always believed in *a* God, but was never devoted to a religion. However, again through personal experience this started to change; more so *question*. 'The Devil's Theatre' has me questioning faith (through Sole): 'We're a far more interesting bunch down here. The angels ignore our invitations.'

'There's no one up in the heaven except the angel because their standards are *too* high.'

'Once you go down, you never come up.'

Again, similar to 'Me, Myself and I' the fear of getting old is evident at the end of this short story. This example also supports Freud's belief (2003, p.28) of "Unsatisfied desires are the motive forces behind fantasies, every fantasy being a wish-fulfilment, correcting an unsatisfactory reality." If I'm unsatisfied about something I attempt to create something satisfying – ironically a darker world, but a *happier* world.

Having worked for the NHS I was becoming increasingly aware that something was bound to pop up: 'Watch Out'. Having written 'Me, Myself and I' and 'The Devil's Theatre', mindful of their potential I wanted to do something a little different. I had written supernatural horror and challenged myself to write another unfamiliar subgenre; body horror. It's important as horror writers to keep challenging ourselves; there's always a danger of complacency. That's the interesting point about reading particular subgenres of horror – how do we *learn* from what we read? What do we *take* from it?

I decided to rewrite a university assignment; at the time I wasn't aware it was an attempt of the body horror genre, but nevertheless, I was unsatisfied with the text and didn't consider it to belong to any subgenre. I wanted to keep the uncanny of the eyes invading a human body, but write about something from a more *mature* perspective; keeping the *idea* fresh, but *writing* something new. 'Me, Myself and I' was an explosion of fear. 'Watch Out' was a controlled perception of experience. Again, I could apply the same formula of the internal fear (again, failure) and integrate it with personal experience (again, of being a porter) – similar themes. However, I wanted to explore the themes and issues of working in a hospital, addressing personal concerns which are combined with personal experience; the fulfilment of the job, colleagues, the environment. I wanted to capture the essence of how an aspiring writer feels in regards to a different job. This can be identified on the first page:

'The worst thing is it happened and it *still* happening.'

'Instead the skies were dreary and I was at first restrained, captive, now imprisoned.'

'People tended to come and go.'

And later on:

'The problem with that environment is it's a gossip zone; a bitching region; a moaning district. Everyone listened, participated.'

'Martin's a lot older than me, walking and talking evidence of how twenty five years in this job can make you bonkers.'

And in regards to the horrible experiences I've personally witnessed:

'It was gone.

But it was there.

It was there and watching me.' – The dark cloud of memory hovering above. I also wanted to end 'Watch Out' capturing the end of life, with Edward and his senior colleague Martin taking the deceased person down to

the morgue, as well as a reminder to the reader of the duties and responsibilities a porter contributes to a hospital.

Again, I'd written first person narration. For me, I think the more *personal* the emotion determines the narration. Also, because working in a hospital is such a busy environment with people constantly making eye contact, I wanted to capture the horror from the first person; the 'I'. Similar to death and the unknown, bodily invasion is a universal theme, and the setting of a hospital couldn't be more appropriate, where the human mind and body is under threat constantly.

I think more of the setting and atmosphere was important to me here as the horror writer. I didn't want to waste valuable life experience. I've learnt as well that I've got into a habit of writing about people from personal experience. I tend to imagine their physical appearance, which therefore reminds me of their personality; I associate certain images with people I know. If I write about someone it's because they've impacted my life – positive or negative. As Jens (2007, p.68) suggests in regards to characterisation: "These choices can lead to excellent plotting possibilities for the story." Our characters can *change* an entire idea. I had to get 'Watch Out' out of my system; the emotion was like a snake around my neck.

It's important to discuss the bodily invasion itself of 'Watch Out' – the eyes. Carroll (1990, p.160) proposes the paradox of horror as "That the works of horror are in some sense both attractive and repulsive is essential to an understanding of the genre." In regards to this I indeed have a personal paradox of eye contact; settling and uncomfortable. I've had several experiences where I've entered certain departments of Worthing hospital and witnessed a seated crowd of strangers staring at me as if I'm an alien in foreign territory. This insecurity fuelled the bodily invasion of 'Watch Out'.

I've always found eye contact to be personal, but 'normal' in everyday existence. Eye contact can determine a lot of things. The idea of someone looking at you can be comforting (I'm noticed), but unsettling (why

are you looking at me?). I'm attracted to the odd scenario of what would we see if we could see *ourselves*? Eye contact is a powerful feeling.

Comparing 'Me, Myself and I' to 'Watch Out' captures two completely different horrors and scenarios. 'Me, Myself and I' is claustrophobic. 'Watch Out' is the danger of freedom becoming imprisoned like a butterfly in a jar. 'The Devil's Theatre' is where it belongs; in a deeper and darker place. Robert Sheppard (2000) believes "Poetics finds things by accident, by mistake." From the very day I started studying this MA by Research I had no idea I would find the following: 'Me, Myself and I' was reassurance (I *can* write and *will* continue to write). 'The Devil's Theatre' was revenge (it's my turn to be under the spotlight). 'Watch Out' was a confession (exposure of insecurities).

Lansdale (1998) identifies "Reading is the fuel, and you have to fill up the tank constantly." I propose here that writing is emptying that tank; sometimes we're unaware of when it's filling and how much is going into it, other times we're attentive of when it's filling up and what's going into it. Connolly (2006) believes "I think a lot of writers are always looking for the one person in the room who isn't clapping, because that's the person who has figured out what frauds they are." I tend to see myself as the fraud – I will never be satisfied with what I've written. Poetics won't allow me to. Personal poetics can change *what* we write, *how* we write. That mental piece of clay will never have a definite shape.

Why I Write Horror

The horror genre allows a degree of honesty. The horror genre provides question. Writing horror could provide a clear or vague answer, but an answer nevertheless. For example, what scares me now (the fear of getting old, the fear of failure, and the fear of death) might not scare me in the future. There will be *new* fears compared to these, would then be *old* fears (the fear of being a bad parent, the fear of *not* being published, and the fear of illness – to ponder). That fear of the unknown applies yet again. The question of my position on this planet will never be fully answered. As Barker (1997) cried out: “It's the only thing that I can say, without question, helps me get to the page - this puzzle that is unsolved; why the fuck am I alive?”

Writing horror can be a therapy. Even though I'm aware the puzzle will never be solved, I still attempt to solve it. What helps me get to the keyboard is how I'm feeling – which is pain. I write horror because I'm in pain, physical or mental. Writing is very physical. Writing is an enormous mental challenge.

It's an everlasting training session: we as writers train ourselves to analyse, we train ourselves to be observant and to change our way of thinking. Then we write. I think sometimes we can use our personal poetics consciously; our imagination to our advantage. We write some more. We finish our horror story. Afterwards we read it again – normally unsatisfied because of common mistakes or its lack of potential. During this process we might discover another idea and write something else, but, ironically there is *never* an ending to being a writer because there's always a new *beginning* to write. Once we become a writer and the process of self-hypnotism becomes a familiar experience we are constantly attempting to achieve the same aims and intentions: a horror story.

Of course the horror writer is an individual and has their unique way of operating. I propose through experience and practice poetics can change our perception once we become familiar with common tendencies as writers; the horror genre can, too. If I see a particular event or incident I'm attracted to (and there's normally something malevolent behind the force) I'll immediately subvert the image or characters into an *idea* which could become a *story*.

That's the great satisfaction for me as a horror writer. I'm concerned with the weird, the uncanny, for a number of reasons; it's where my *creativity* comes from. I can allow myself to create strange creatures in an unstable and unreliable world. I seek a performance to take pleasure from the *pain* I'm experiencing. As Barker (1987) reminds us "Most horror fiction is about throwing the monster out, about the rejection of the strange, the rejection of the marginal."

Throwing that monster out is a part of the pain; watching it live is part of the pleasure. What this means to me is an *opportunity* – an opportunity to take *creative closure* from personal horrors. The satisfaction from creativity (originality, uniqueness, vision) is somewhat more of a comfort than the closure from writing and reflecting upon themes I'm most concerned with – a physical and mental release.

Lansdale (2007, p.76) suggests "It's not the event, it's how you feel about the event." This supports earlier observations – I'm drawn to the emotions behind the experience. Writing horror allows me to remember who I am, and I am indeed alive. I can discover new things about myself, which is personal, but it doesn't stay personal because I write about it. As an individual recognising a fear creates new worlds – I don't know what the world looks like and who the characters are, but I want to find out. Writing is very much discovery, and the horror genre provides quite a margin for this.

As a horror writer I'm constantly learning. Every book, whether it's a practitioner's or a text of fiction teaches me new things; the more opinions

the better, different perspectives help. If I'm learning then it's important to demonstrate what I've learnt and it's just as important not to let it go to waste; to pursue creative writing as a profession.

Writing horror is comforting, too. If I'm scared about a particular event or concept then reading horror allows me to overcome that fear; not literally, but I'll *experience* a degree of achievement. This then coincides with being the horror writer; what scares the horror writer might not necessarily scare the horror reader, but if I did my job properly than they'd be concerned; maybe not exactly *scared*, but curiously intrigued.

It's all about being comfortable. I feel like I can *contribute* to this genre. It allows me to be creative and create worlds which, yes, reflect the darkness of reality (and some realities are indeed extremely dark), but I know the way out. I know where the monster is hiding – the reader doesn't. I know if the characters will always survive – the characters don't. Again, it all supports Freud's belief in child play and fantasy, and correcting an unsatisfied reality with a satisfied fantasy. It's important for the horror writer to challenge, reflecting upon a modern society and its insecurities.

There's a lot about the cosmic universe I don't understand. I'm not particularly fond of the human race. H.P. Lovecraft (2014) famously said: "Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large." Those common human laws, interests and emotions I'm concerned with, eager to explore. I like to dig under the surface of humankind and see how vulnerabilities and insecurities can be represented.

I find from research similarities with myself and horror writers – as people. H.P. Lovecraft (2014) shared "I never ask a man what his business is, for it never interests me. What I ask him about are his thoughts and dreams." I'm similar in this aspect and have been for a long time, more concerned with a bigger picture of life. Barker (1995) revealed "I like to work.

I don't like bars; I don't like clubs, I like to be at home working." I've started to mould into this manner, too; naturally dedicating a lot of time to writing would result in this. However, I think I feel the need to explore humankind and its value and worth, then reflect upon it, write about it.

To finish, I like the worlds I can create because they firstly belong to me, secondly the reader; it's very much a physical and mental transfer, but the stories will always be mine more so than the reader's. The horror writer has a degree of control over what the individual writes, but it's that small chunk of uncontrollable desires and monsters which has the greater impact – that's what creates a horror story. One thing horror writers all have in common is what Connolly (2006) believes: "In the end, whatever you write, you should write it because it's important to you."

The dream is to become published in the future. At this stage in my life I would be more than satisfied to just publish *one* story, but I know eventually I would want to publish *more*. However, the thought of becoming *highly* successful (however unlikely) is quite daunting; the pressure of expectations, exposure and invasion of personal life. If I ever cross that bridge I'm bound to bump into a few monsters – I'll see them lurking in the shadows and ask them to join me.

Fresh Blood: 15, 711

The Impact of Personal Poetics on a Horror Writer: 13, 728

Total: 29, 439

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