

# ROOT OF EVIL

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A VILLAINOUS ANTHOLOGY

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## JAWS BY CLAIRE O'CONNOR

The villains: dry-skinned, various colored-manes, too many limbs. You've seen the coral reefs, bleached. You've seen the turtles with straws up their noses. There's a dead zone from agricultural runoff in the Gulf of Oman the size of Florida, and that island of floating plastic in the Pacific is now three times the size of France. Oil spills, climate change. Overfishing will starve us all.

In our version the great shark never stops. Maine is only the beginning. She snaps that bearded marine biologist in two, and she swallows the police chief whole. She devours locals swimming in hidden bays and feasts on holidaymakers wading along the beaches. She senses the electromagnetic pulse of their collective hearts: hairy men, smoother women, acne-studded teenagers, plump toddlers. She does not discriminate. The water turns crimson, and red waves lap the shore. Seagulls come in great clouds to pick at the remnants of flesh carried by the tide.

She grows larger. She travels down the Atlantic coast, gorging herself on humans of various sizes and shades in Cape Cod, Long Island, Myrtle Beach, Miami. She grows so big she can devour boats stuffed with people: kayaks, then dinghies, small trawlers, and yachts. When the coast guard comes for her, she gulps their patrol boats and breaches into the sky to take down their helicopters. Her great hide forever bears the scars from those blades. She circles the Caribbean, then circumnavigates the globe. She swallows catamarans, shipping containers, an entire fleet of Carnival cruise ships. When the military tracks her down, she swallows every last submarine.

She inspires a revolution. Bull sharks swim upstream to pluck people out of rivers and lakes. Hammerheads, with their tiny mouths, team up in huge schools to ram and batter their

human prey. Whale sharks and basking sharks, who only feed on microscopic plankton, seize people in their toothless jaws and drag them down until they drown. Bottom-dwellers like nurse sharks and wobbegongs rise to the surface in frenzied attacks, and deep-sea dwellers like Greenland sharks and Goblin sharks emerge from the abyss to fight in the blinding light.

We cannot catch the villains when they cower on dry land, but life is not a movie. There is no ending. We can only hope that in gradual increments the oceans will cool. The algae will return to their coral homes, and the number of fish will swell and soar. We will mate, feel our pups wriggle inside of us, and hope that our children will face a better world than the one we found. The floating island of plastic will serve as a reminder: we must be vigilant. The villains are never satiated. We gnash our teeth to sharpen them. We will be ready.

## I NEED AN EVIL BITCH TO SAVE ME BY SANDRA VIDEMSKY

I stare down into the teacup in front of me, its rippling contents giving me pause. The woman who'd poured it sits with a cup of her own, bringing the edge to her thin, purple-painted lips. We were family once—by marriage, not blood. I'm not sure what we are now.

She takes immediate note when I don't drink and scoffs drily. "Come now, aren't we long past those days of vying for the attention of an old man and the admiration of a court?"

"Perhaps," I muse. She has little left to gain in killing me. Still, old instincts die hard. "But since when would you pass up temptation?"

She arches one sharply-peaked brow, her violet eyes looking down at me, not deigning to respond.

I take the cup in both hands and nearly drain it. It tastes of herbs, licorice, and—predictably—apple. I could never stand the taste of apple since I was seventeen. "Nonetheless, I've developed a tolerance to the seven most common poisons in the land."

She doesn't hide her curling grin. "Impressive. You've learned."

Even sitting in a witch's woodland hut, she's regal and carries an air of authority. In my memory she was a garish, overly-manicured, provocatively dressed old hag. Ugly. But back then, I still thought girls showing too much cleavage deserved contempt. This woman, closer to my age than my mother's, exudes boldness and power. She's more than beauty; she's everything.

She stands and beckons me to follow, a conspiratorial lilt to her chin. She takes me to a dim chapel with a dais. From its top she lifts a velvet cloth revealing a silver tray polished to a reflective sheen. Of course. I should've known she'd get a new mirror after I smashed hers.

I gaze at our paired likenesses. In mine, I still see the most exquisite, purest bride the kingdom had ever known, a prize in white lace. Sickening. In hers, pure potential.

The former queen's eyes flutter closed, entering a trance. She mouths an incantation and leans low over the tray, her swan neck outstretched. Her lips part and she breathes upon it, clouding the

surface. When she wipes it with her sleeve I no longer see my face but that of my husband, once the prince who'd woken me, now king of the land. He's not alone. A pretty young blonde with big doe eyes fills his arms and they sway to some tune. He whispers some nonsense in her ear that makes her laugh. The hand at her waist slinks lower until it's shamelessly cupping her ass.

Bile rises in my throat but I don't look away. My eyes bore into his skull, and I hope he feels my stare.

The former queen tilts the tray for a better look and *tut-tuts* before covering it again. "It's an unwinnable game, being the fairest of them all. There's always going to be someone new, younger, more enticing."

"If only chasing younger girls was the only thing," I spit out, thinking of his moods when he takes me like he's entitled to me, and my every attempt to decline is taken as a challenge. When he plays too rough or keeps me under him too long.

The former queen meets my eyes with her piercing violet gaze, and I sense she knows *exactly* what I mean.

Once he was charmed by my batting eyelashes and guileless ways. He'd play my guide in the secret world of intimate love and wifely duties.

*It's supposed to hurt the girl a little.*

*But why did pleasure not come for me the way it did him?*

*Such silly questions, little lamb. That's just the way it is.*

I clench my jaw, snarling. "I would have him bow to *me* for a change." The words are hot nectar. "And his brothers, his useless advisors. I'd rid the castle of his bastards crawling about like vermin."

"And then?" she asks.

"Then?" I echo, unsure.

Disappointment crosses her face, her eyes losing that excited, menacing sparkle.

Why, then I'd have the whole court in my thrall. Exactly as she did...

Fool that I am!

“No, you’re right. I’d carve out my husband’s heart and eat it. And then I want to experience real power. To be the huntress, not the hunted. And experience all the pleasures that come with it without shame.”

Her lips curl in a catlike grin. Her chest rumbles with a deep, purring chuckle. The walls of the chapel evaporate into smoke and we’re standing in a wooded clearing. The queen’s laughter is echoed and multiplied by dark figures encircling us.

Witches. A whole coven. The queen offers me her hand, her nails long and pointed. “Welcome to the sisterhood, Snow White.”

## MISERY'S COMPANY BY ALEX CARRIGAN

Annie continued to slowly rock in her chair, adjusting the faded wool blanket draped over her legs. She held the pages of a manuscript in one hand while reaching over for a cup of tea on the end table next to her with the other. She took a sip of the bitter tea as she heard a low groaning sound next to her.

“Hold on, I’m almost done,” she said. “This is the best part, so let’s just appreciate your talent, Paul.”

The fireplace crackled, leading to another groan from the figure next to her. Annie took another sip of tea, set the cup down next to her collection of porcelain animal figurines, then continued reading.

*“And as Misery fell into Ian’s arms, she felt as though she was wrapped in the embrace of God. It was as if the world fell completely silent in that moment, allowing Misery to close her eyes and take in the sound of Ian’s heartbeat in staccato against hers.”*

The groaning continued. Annie glanced over to the figure next to her, her patience nearing its depletion, then turned back to the manuscript.

*“Ian lifted Misery onto the back of his steed before climbing up and wrapping her arms around his sturdy waist. She-she-Paul!”*

Annie grabbed the cane resting next to her rocking chair and jabbed the groaning figure next to her. The figure let out a garbled whine with each hit.

“I told you to shut your cock-a-doody mouth! I took away your tongue specifically so you wouldn’t interrupt me!”

Annie looked over the figure in the adjacent seat. Paul had come into her life a broken, injured man when she found him in that upside down car in the snow. Over the last few months, Annie felt like she had no choice but to break him down even further. After all, he took away her Misery, so why



couldn't she take away a foot? Or a thumb? Or his tongue after he said such heinous things before trying to burn the manuscript?

Fortunately, even for someone as out of shape, Annie was still able to overpower him when he tried to make her think he destroyed the only copy of *Misery's Return*. Farm work was always her favorite form of exercise; it made all those long nights in the maternity ward easy to tolerate with all the stamina she had developed taking care of pigs. That dummy actually got her to think he destroyed *Misery's Return* and then tried to *kill her* after everything she did for him. Everyone she killed for him.

Once her heart finally settled down, and once she was done getting Paul's penance for his foolish action, it was time to finally partake of the novel she had been dreaming of. Thus, she hoisted him into the chair next to hers, tied him down tightly, lit a fire, and began to read his magnum opus.

*"She held on tight as they rode off, their future bright, and their love even brighter. Misery and Ian needed to return to their child, the true brightness of their life. For what was the need for sunrises and sunset when they illuminated so brightly?"*

*The End."*

Annie held the manuscript to her chest. She could feel tears welling in her eyes as she took in all of Paul's words. Tears were welling in Paul's eyes too, not that she noticed.

"Oh, Paul. It's everything I had wanted," she said to him. "Thank you so much for this gift."

Paul replied with another garbling sound.

Annie chuckled a girlish chuckle to herself.

"This changes everything," she said. "Misery's story may end here, but there's so much more you can do, Paul. So many more threads to follow. Maybe a sequel following Misery's child. Oh, Paul. I'm so glad I let you keep your hands."

Paul gargled. Annie chuckled.

"But that's for tomorrow," she said.

Annie flipped the manuscript back to the title page. *Misery's Return*. Such words had never given her such a lust for life.

“Now,” Annie said, turning the cover page over. “Let’s read it again. Just once more before we go to bed.”

Annie began to read the pages of the manuscript again, her voice joyous and spirited, while Paul could do nothing but match with more garbles and groans.

## HARRY LIME TRIES TO BUY SOME LIMES BY JOHN WEAGLY

*(Lights up. A bodega on Vienna Avenue. CAROL works behind the cash register. She is middle aged and looks like she's been working here since the war. After a moment, HARRY enters. He's in his mid-30's, large and imposing and wears a black coat and black fedora. Zither music plays in the background.)*

HARRY: Do you have any limes?

CAROL: Lemons. We have lemons.

HARRY: I was going to make a gin and tonic. I need a lime.

CAROL: Use a lemon.

HARRY: Don't be preposterous.

CAROL: I don't know what to tell you. We have lemons.

HARRY: No Ginger Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: No Mandarin Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: No Palestinian Sweet Limes?

CAROL: No, sir.

HARRY: How about Australian Finger Limes?

CAROL: I'm afraid not.

HARRY: Venezuelan Big-Toe Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: Quivering Merkin Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: Is that zither music you're listening to?

CAROL: It is. My husband played the zither, rest his soul. He provided the baseline in an all-zither band. They toured college campuses and beer halls. He fell into the life of fame and started snogging every zither-groupie he could lay fingers on. Strumming and plucking, plucking and strumming. One of those little strumpets convinced him to do away with me. He took out an outrageous insurance policy and tried to throw me off the top of a Ferris Wheel. He died in the electric chair.

HARRY: That sounds like a horrible memory. Why listen to zither music if that's what it makes you think you of?

CAROL: I like zither music.

HARRY: I see. Do you have any Oscillating Cactus Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: Calico Boomerang Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: Alida Valley Cotton Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: How about Limequats?

CAROL: What are those?

HARRY: A hybrid of a lime and a kumquat.

CAROL: Never heard of it. So, no.

HARRY: Calloway Salted-Crust Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: New York Plissken Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: Arkansas Sasquatch Limes?

CAROL: No.

HARRY: So, no limes?

CAROL: (*Shaking her head.*) Lemons.

HARRY: In Key West, for 30 years under a cloud of sun-filled debauchery, they had obnoxious tourists, unbearable heat, shark attacks and self-important authors, but they produced Honey Lime Chicken, Cilantro Lime Dragon Noodles and Key Lime Pie. In California they had artistic achievement, the American dream and lemon trees as far as the eye could see – and what did that produce? Lemonade.

CAROL: What are you going on about?

HARRY: Nothing. Where are your lemons? I'll just make a gin fizz.

*(Lights down.)*

## NICE ACCENT BY JONATHAN CARDEW

The Accent lives in many throats, many mouths.

Hard T's and glottal stops.

A penchant for joining disparate words with an R.

Nice accent.

The Accent is evil, a little laconic.

Not sure if it is reciting Shakespeare or about to wreak havoc upon an unsuspecting American city?

The latter is indubitably the case.

Nice accent.

The Accent's accent was forged in the very fires of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

It is not Liverpool or Manchester or Newcastle.

It is a thin sliver of middle ground running around the Isles.

Nice accent.

The Accent is quiet, careful, calculated, cool.

Nice accent.

The Accent is David Attenborough's long-lost brother, but stamping out nature, a hater of all things green.

Nice accent.

The Accent comes to America to destroy America.

Nice accent.

It comes to set off incendiary devices.

Nice accent.

It comes to incapacitate a soaring tower.

Nice accent.

It has a nice accent, nice.

## IN THE CITY OF KISSING DRAGONS BY TARA CAMPBELL

Was it passion or fear that cost us our city? Was it hubris? Or was it sheer laziness?

Cinders rained down on that final day. Embers spewed from steaming nostrils; forked tongues escaped their separate houses of teeth to slide against one another. The dragons kissed in flight, looping upward from craggy mountaintops, twining around their partners in ecstasy; or they kissed while writhing on the ground, entangled, engendering earthquakes with each rough tumble. They kissed in twos and threes and occasionally by the dozens, slithering and rubbing in orgiastic clouds of smoke.

No, dragons are not natural kissers. These beasts were enchanted, bewitched by dark human arts. The people of our city found it too onerous to keep killing dragons one by one, year after year—and for what, the dragons would have argued, for merely being hungry and feeding?—and so our council met and debated, finally agreeing upon a spell that would draw the beasts toward a different kind of hunger, one that would distract them with unquenchable passion for one another to the exclusion of all else: eating, drinking, anything actually required for their survival. They would kiss until they wasted away and died, and really, it was agreed, wouldn't that be the loveliest and most humane of exits?

The council ordered one final individual slaying, required for the spell. The dead dragon's heart was carried up the winding mountain path to our temple. Spiceweed was burned and we called out to our goddess of fertility, entreating her to inflict a heightened version of our own wantonness upon our dragons. We chanted and danced. We covered each other in rose oil and kissed. We moaned and writhed, thrust and sweated in a haze of incense, and our heat rose up on scented, oily clouds to find the nostrils of every dragon in the land.

Drawn by our goddess, the dragons congregated on the mountains surrounding the altar, making it their new mecca of mating. We initially thought they were attacking one another, but we soon understood it for what it was: kissing. Dragons were not meant to kiss, but the plumes of smoke had been filled with human carnality, so the dragons began adopting human ways. Their tongues



sought each other out, forcing them to open their mouths to each other's razor maws, these mouths meant to pluck livestock from hillsides, to bellow at humans with spears, to erase us in torrents of flame. These mouths meant to reap, to consume, to avenge, to destroy, were suddenly called upon to give pleasure, perhaps even to love.

To be clear, they didn't—give pleasure, or love. The dragons were still dragons, and could only comprehend kissing as taking, as possession, or consumption. Their tongues sought each other out and they wrestled, mouths splayed, teeth ripping hides, blood streaming, saliva dripping and singeing rock below. Their bodies coiled upon one another as they grappled, scales glistening and shedding onto the mountaintops like snow.

And still more dragons gathered, summoned by the spell, until there was no more room for them over the temple. From afar, we watched them spread out through the air, kissing, coiling, belching embers, growling, shedding, spilling their caustic blood, flying ever closer until they reached the skies of our city, soaring above us—above those who had dreamt up the spell.

Cinders rained down upon our city, setting rooftops alight. We fled burning buildings only to meet the sting of dragon spittle. We looked up into the crimson rain of dragon blood, pressing our ears against the huff and bellow of dragons mid-kiss. We wiped the sting from our eyes, gathered our children and fled the flames of the only home we'd ever known. Long after the fire reduced our city to ash, dragon scales tumbled down, a flurry of glittering fat flakes.

Our city is now barren—for us. Dragons still writhe and twist in their terrifying knots overhead. Mating does occur: the females only stop kissing long enough to lay their eggs, many of which are destroyed, rolled on and crushed, or disintegrated under dragon drool, but enough survive to hatch and perpetuate the race. These dragons no longer need to eat. They have adapted to this human invention of kissing, subsisting on passion alone. They leave all of us and our remaining straggle of livestock in peace, but there is no way to survive the destruction of their love.

And so they wheel above the wrecked shell of our once vibrant city, twisting, bleeding, twining, peeling, howling, clamoring, dripping, drooling, roiling—victorious in their newfound love.

## ON FOCUS AND FORCE BY JASON FOX

hey dad,

i hope the messenger pelican got your attention. i don't know, the critter tricks are just coming easier than they ever did before. and at this point, the animals here have gone mad with my meddling. you wouldn't approve, but then again i suspect you never did.

the neighbor's dog was biting our driveway all night until its teeth broke. chalky tooth marks and blood all over the ground. whatever, i could have used a bit of restraint on that one. that's what you always used to make me chant on those cold nights in the ravine, right? *re-straint! con-trol! re-straint! con-trol!*

*re-fucking-straint.* i've made it so most of the squirrels will only drag themselves along by their front bits. there was one with its legs spread on the crest of my roof, eyeing me without lifting its head. it looked post coital.

i was fumbling with that old dented goblet grampy sampy left behind when a duck came into the backyard and ate an entire mouse trap. the entire thing. the trap had sprung so long ago the mouse was mostly dust. it was a beautiful occasion and it finally helped me dismiss your advice to *leave the birds be.*

all these animals. i was restraining them with ropes, hoping to show you what i'm capable of. but i ran out of rope so i started using horses' reins. the ones threaded with gold that we found in the carriage house floorboards. in the end, all the animals got away. you know i'm not good with knots, regardless of rope or rein.

then the mail came and i listened to the mail woman while she talked on her bluetooth. *i heard davis tell alicia that he saw some dudes in hazmat suits vacuuming prairie dogs out of their holes way out in some suburb because they went insane with the plague*, she said, not to me. i stopped her and shooed the cat that'd been licking my feet. *excuse me, can you write that down for me? the thing you just said about the prairie dogs?*

*wait hang on*, she tapped her bluetooth and turned to me. *what do you want? i want you to come with me and write a true account of the rumor you heard. and why would i go and do that? because it makes a difference when people notice what i've done.*

the mail woman looked at my face and then at my feet. she tapped the bluetooth again and continued her conversation while walking down the street. a few houses away, i watched her bend down low to drop a small parcel on someone's porch. the way she leaned over made me think of a stork leaning into a strong wind. when i imagined the wind suddenly stopping, she fell hard onto her knees and palms, spilling her bag of letters onto the sidewalk. i watched her clean up the mess and suddenly realized that you, father, are very much an animal. re-fucking-straint.

see you soon.

your son,

the human lizard

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Claire O'Connor's** stories have appeared in the *Baltimore Review*, *Shenandoah*, the *Southern Indiana Review*, *Wigleaf*, and others. She has previously won *The Missouri Review's* Miller Audio Prize for prose. She lives with her wife in Scotland and various other parts of the world.

Emerging writer **Sandra Videmsky** was born in California, educated in Memphis, tested by nature in the swamps of Arkansas, and found sanctuary in Milwaukee where she currently resides. She attempts to write between her day job with a nonprofit and occasionally succeeds.

**Alex Carrigan** (@carriganak) is an editor, writer, and critic from Virginia. He has had fiction, poetry, and literary reviews published in *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Lambda Literary Review*, *Empty Mirror*, *Gertrude Press*, *Quarterly West*, *Whale Road Review*, 'Stories About Penises' (*Guts Publishing*, 2019), 'Closet Cases: Queers on What We Wear' (*Et Alia Press*, 2020), 'ImageOutWrite Vol. 9,' and 'Last Day, First Day Vol. 2.' He is also the co-editor of 'Please Welcome to the Stage...: A Drag Literary Anthology' with *House of Lobsters Literary*.

*Locus Magazine* once called **John Weagly** "a new writer worth reading and following." His short stories have won some awards. As a playwright, his scripts have been produced on four continents.

**Jonathan Cardew** is the author of *A World Beyond Cardboard* (*ELJ Editions*, '22). His flash fiction appears in *Cincinnati Review*, *Passages North*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Wigleaf*, and other venues. Originally from the UK, he lives in Milwaukee, Wis.

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