

Climbing Jacob's Ladder: Four Poets Aspiring for Greatness Speak

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It is common place to collect baseball cards of the great players. But go find yourself a Mickey Mantle 1952 rookie card in mint condition (\$10 million value I just read) and you have something very rare and precious. So this time I am going to create a sort of "rookie card" interview of four wonderful dark poets aspiring to succeed in a very tough field.

For those not yet fortunate enough to know them let me introduce four such poets: ***E.F. Shrader, Karen Bovenmyer, Allan Rozinski and Randy D. Rubin.*** If given the opportunity, I see their contribution to dark poetry growing and you'll consider this rookie card something special as well.

I have had the privilege and joy of meeting each of them at the Stokercons in Las Vegas and Providence. It is almost a platitude to speak of the networking opportunities by attending a Stokercon. It is more important to me to talk about developing friendships. I had the pleasure of reading each of these poets' works while editing Volumes III and IV of the HWA Poetry Showcase. I believe that besides learning to admire their work I have aspired to become their friend as well.

There are certainly many highly praised and recognized faces in dark poetry. Aspiring to add your name to that list is a challenge. These four may yet get there and I wanted to talk to them about their individual struggles and the opportunities they have found in the HWA and similar organizations. After the interview I asked them to share two poems they believed to be representative of their best work.

Q: How did you decide to focus on not just poetry but speculative poetry? What or whom do you credit as having best inspired you to pursue this craft?

Bovenmyer: Poetry provides an immediate and visceral release of feelings I'm struggling to comprehend. For me, the allegoric space that speculative genres provide help me best process my feelings. When I create a character and narrative for the specific purpose of processing trauma, the brevity of poetry and microfiction help me get into the feeling and out again quickly. Creating art relieves stress for me also. When I was a small child, my mother regularly read poetry aloud and I enjoyed the brief imaginative journeys micro stories like "Little Orphant Annie" by James Whitcomb Riley and "The Owl and the Pussycat" by Edward Lear took me on. Anne Sexton was an important influence for me as an adult, as well as Sylvia Plath.

Rozinski: Perhaps my much earlier encounters with speculative poetry before I began writing poetry planted the seeds of interest in writing it. Examples might include Poe's "The Raven" and "Annabel Lee," Shelley's "Ozymandias," Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." I can't say that in my early attempts at writing poetry I consciously took those examples into consideration, but given my preference for horror and dark fiction, writing speculative poetry with those themes and content eventually proved to be a natural fit.

In reflecting upon when I first began to write poetry, I determined that I did so in a very sporadic and informal way back in 2014. It then occurred to me that there was a likely connection between my first efforts at writing poetry and my father's death in 2013. Although we weren't close, I was involved with supporting him through the increasing crises resulting from his decline in health until his death. It was an ugly, intimate window into the end stage of life, a window from which there was no looking away. For a time afterward I mentally distanced myself from it (or, rather, I thought I did) but its effects seemed to work on me beneath my surface awareness. So, I think, unconsciously, that process over time implanted in me a more visceral awareness of my own mortality and how rapidly it was approaching, along with an sense of dissatisfaction, feelings that there was a necessary dimension or factor in my life that was missing. This provoked me to seek a means of exploration and creative expression that resulted in my beginning to write poetry.

As my interest in writing poetry increased, I discovered Bruce Boston and Robert Frazier's poem *Return to the Mutant Rain Forest* and related poems that would eventually be included in a collection titled *Visions of the Mutant Rain Forest*—just the title of that collection alone is suggestive of a range of tantalizing possibilities in variations on that theme!—a fascinating concept, in which the poets examine from various perspectives a near-future world in which a man-made disaster in a rain forest results in radical biological transformations with frightening and ironic outcomes. Of course, Bruce is Zeus among the pantheon of speculative poets, and I've read more of his poems than any other speculative poet. Ann Schwader (*Fearful Symmetries*) is another poet whose dark speculative poetry was a revelation to me, offering up a smorgasbord of unsurpassed sinister delights. There are plenty of other poets I like and admire, but for the sake of making this interview manageable, I thought I'd name three contemporary speculative poets whose work intrigued and impressed me enough early on to try my hand at writing speculative poetry.

Shrader: I was fortunate to have many encouraging teachers throughout my education who fostered and valued creativity. They encouraged reading widely and writing as craft. Public schools rock. There are also many poets - way too many to list - that I've come to admire for their ability to balance the beautiful and the brutal; stylistically, I'm interested and inspired by work that presents complexities and surrealism alongside the mundane.

Rubin: *I suppose the best answer to this question is that there seems to be an inherent darkness inside me that sees most everything in my head by the light of the moon. I am clinically depressed and my moods swing quite a bit. I tend to see the beauty in the darkness, so to speak. I have a very inquisitive soul that always poses questions about "what would happen if..." and then I let my mind frolic along the fields of those questions and explore the darkest possible outcomes, then I set them to verse. I would credit Edgar Allan Poe and William Shakespeare as my two most inspiring dark poets. They were the first and they've really stood the test of time.*

Q: *I often meet two kinds of poets. There is what I call the "Machine Poet" who sits down every single day for some period of time and cranks out poems. The other is the "Muse Poet" who only writes when they think the "muse" has touched them, that is, something inspired them. What type are you? What drives you to write? Do you have a preferred place of writing (in the back yard; in the attic; at Starbucks).*

Bovenmyer: I'm both. I'm a machine poet when I've seen an interesting call for submissions come through, or I'm preparing a poem as a response to music, such as "Blind Elephants of Io", or as a response to visual art such as "Lady of Gold." In these cases, I write at pre-arranged times in coffee shops with friends. However, I'm absolutely a muse poet when I need to process a feeling that won't allow me peace until I write about it. These poems are written wherever I am, even if that means I have to dictate them to my smartphone or write them on a napkin. My favorite place to write is in my writing room at home with a cat curled across my lap, or in a social setting with other writers.

Rozinski: For me, there is definitely the muse aspect of poetry, but there is also the more machine or workman-like aspect of making an effort to further the development of the poem when the more inspirational qualities that are there initially are no longer present and the going becomes uncertain. Sometimes inspiration hits you like a lightning bolt, and sometimes you have to court it like a fickle object of desire you hope will finally give you at least a taste of the goods to make you believe that you still have a chance. The process for me when it's working best seems to be when I get a flash of an image or images, a turn of phrase, or a string of words that has some juice to it that all but compels me to locate a pen and paper to write it down before it's lost forever. The further process then seems to involve continuing to work to uncover the rest the poem that seems to have already enfolded itself in my brain—in part, anyway. So it's a process of discovery and insight along with some experimentation, perhaps some research, working through drafts that add to the poem while shaping and refining it until I come to a feeling that the result is as good as I can achieve at that time.

If it doesn't seem like I'm getting further with a particular poem, I may have other partly composed poems that I'll take a look at again to see if I can bring a fresh perspective on them that allows me to work to move them further along. If I don't have any other ideas for something to work on, I might just do a bit of freewriting to see if there is a nugget to work from in the aftermath.

I don't sit down and write down poetry every day, though I try to do it often enough to establish a semblance of a routine. I write at a desk with a computer in a room upstairs in my home. Although the experience of the muse aspect of

poetry writing can be intoxicating, it's often in short supply, and I've come to realize that if you only wait for inspiration to write, you might find that Godot will never arrive. But, by not arriving, maybe Godot helps those who help themselves. Then it doesn't depend on whether Godot comes or not. You just need to do your part to put yourself in a position to be ready if inspiration comes, and if it doesn't, you work at it anyway. It could be that the regular habit itself of sitting and trying to write creates an intention to be receptive to potential ideas, potential inspiration. Or perhaps it trains the mind to seek out more information, areas of interest which could contain content for you to play with and possibly create fertile ground for the birth of another poem. But I do think it is of the utmost importance that you avoid making the process of writing poetry a chore.

Shrader: I'm something of a mechanically driven muse writer. I write on specific days, about five days a week. On the alternate days I edit. I also try quite hard never to ignore or miss a muse moment- if something strikes me I try to get something down immediately, even if it's just notes. Muse it or lose it, I guess.

Rubin: Ha! My muse is a lovely Sicilian woman named, Insomnia, who visits me most nights between the hours of 3AM and daylight, usually wanting me to dance with her around the house, (and I can't dance!) so we have these whispered conversations where she does most of the talking and I listen intently as she imparts all these wonderful story and poem ideas. I try to remember them all and some get jotted down in my nightmare journal, a notebook I keep beside my bed or beside my recliner. Then I usually drift off and forget some of them. Most I get so excited about I have to get up and get to my office to type them into the computer. I am driven to write because not doing so feels dirty to me, like I need to wash the guilt off my skin. As time has gone on I feel the need of it like a drug and there is this "zone" one gets into where the words are flowing like water and every sentence is better than the last, the story feels like its writing itself and that's where the high come through and the chemicals in you are just lighting little fires in your soul as you type (or hand write) and you feel like your contributing to the world of women and men, and art is being produced, and people are going to be entertained, you feel like you're being cleansed under a waterfall. That's what writing is for me. It's cleansing and cathartic... cool. I prefer writing prose at the computer and poetry by hand at my dining room table, then transferring it to the computer where I can take the rough gems and polish them on this here fancy computation device. My desk is small and cluttered with different projects and notes, and the computer takes up a good portion of it and I like the "hug" of the clutter surrounding me when I'm creating spooky-spooky. For my poetry writing I like wide open spaces and my round dining room table affords me that.

Q: What are the struggles and frustrations you have felt in this process of trying to find a niche for yourself? And, do you believe that your membership in organizations like the HWA have helped your efforts? What achievement so far do you cherish the most?

Bovenmyer: I don't know that I've ever found a niche for myself. I primarily write science fiction, fantasy, and horror because I find these most interesting, so my work is scattered across all three genres. I first started publishing because an editor invited me to submit to a horror anthology. I was uncertain if what I wrote was horror, so I marathon-listened to the Pseudopod podcast, starting with episode one, and quickly discovered the bulk of my writing was, in fact, horror. Most of my friends and reading experiences were science fiction or fantasy, so I didn't understand how I had a place in the horror genre until I started really exploring work defined as such. Stoker-award winning author Nancy Holder encouraged me to apply for HWA awards, and upon being awarded the Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley fellowship, I joined the HWA and started attending Stokercons. I learned so much there! I've met wonderful mentors and amazing writers through HWA and feel it's enhanced my career. I am extremely proud to announce I have recently accepted the post of Assistant Editor of Pseudopod, coming full circle to work for the place that defined horror for me. Because I'm a poet, we are discussing a future episode that will focus on dark poetry, so expect to see a call for submissions for this from us sometime in 2019.

Rozinski: I don't know that I've been particularly frustrated about finding a niche, as I've only submitted poetry to a few markets other than those that accept speculative or dark poetry. When I began submitting poems for publication, the poems I'd written were mostly dark or speculative horror (though I've also written science fiction and fantasy poetry). Getting poems accepted and published is exciting and gives you some objective validation that the poems you're writing meet an objective standard for an editor. But after you get an increasing number of poems published, a sense of dissatisfaction can creep in if you think that you're not producing enough or not getting enough of the poems you've submitted accepted and published. That head space can be a damper on creativity for me, as I find it difficult to produce

something I'm satisfied with if there is a constant and intrusive push to produce. In addition, it can be a struggle at times for me to find an adequate amount of time to write with the sustained energy and what I suppose might be characterized as a meditative quality of mind that I find to be the optimal state for writing poetry. And lastly, there are poems that I've seen through to completion that are odd ducks, not the conventional stuff I've seen in in publications that contain dark and speculative poetry. Nevertheless, I consider them to be my children in a sense, and I want to at least give them a chance to succeed . . . if I can only figure out where the hell to send them! It may be that some of those poems lie more in the weird or experimental domains. When my mind veers into a counterproductive mental states or tendencies, I have to recognize them and remind myself that all I really have control over is writing poetry and sending it out. That all being said, I am also aware that logical next step or endgame for a poet is to generate enough poems for a chapbook or a collection.

I saw a poll some time ago (I can't remember where) in which readers of various types of literature were asked what kind of writing they read, only 2% read poetry. That's not to say that I think poetry is going the way of the spotted dodo. In fact, I read a recent article that indicated in a current trend the number of people reading poetry has doubled (I believe it was a New York Times article), and with the increased popularity of flash fiction, micro fiction, and other short forms of writing, maybe poetry is benefitting from the rising interest in the short form.

The Horror Writers Association is supportive of poets of speculative horror and dark poetry. The membership guidelines create an incentive for dark and horror poets to publish enough poems for compensation in qualifying markets to achieve affiliate or full member status. I was already selling some of my poems before joining the HWA as an affiliate member, and I continued working toward full member status by meeting the criteria of having poems that had been published and I'd received payment for in the number and monetary amounts to meet the qualifications. The HWA lists qualifying markets for poetry on their web site, along with articles and other information of potential interest to dark and horror poets. I belong the Pennsylvania HWA Chapter, which is headed by Kenneth Caine. The chapter tries to meet monthly. My fellow members of the chapter have been supportive of my efforts, and I have done readings of my poetry at the meetings. After each meeting Ken submits information about chapter members that include submission acceptances, publications, and other news to the HWA monthly newsletter for publication. The Bram Stoker Award is given annually by the HWA at StokerCon to the best dark poetry collection published in the previous year; there is no other organization that offers an award specifically for dark or horror poetry except the HWA. Another resource and means of promotion for HWA poets is Marge Simon's terrific column, *Blood and Spades*, which can be found in the HWA monthly newsletter. She often features a HWA member poet or poets who share some of their poetry and commentary.

Lastly, there is the annual HWA Poetry Showcase, an opportunity for HWA members to get exposure to other members of the HWA and outside its circle. At StokerCon 2018 in Providence, I participated in an event in which contributors to the HWA Poetry Showcase Volume IV could read their poems to the audience and participate in a discussion. David Cowen hosted the event; he'd also been the editor of that volume. The poets featured in the volume were invited to read their poems, and afterward, other dark and horror poets in attendance were offered the opportunity to read poems. That was first poetry writers event I'd ever attended, and David was warm and solicitous, just the sort of experienced person to lead and encourage a gathering of disparate and uncertain poets from the dark side.

I'd have to say the achievement I cherish the most to date was the nomination of my poem "In the Labyrinth" for the 2018 Rhysling Award in the long poem category.

Shrader: Joining HWA has definitely been significant in connecting with other writers. Writing can be pretty isolating, wonderfully so, but it's a gift to get to know other writers and their work. There are many incredible projects, wonderful new writers, and fantastic genre publishers, and HWA membership provides a lot of resources to stay current and connected with them.

Rubin: The struggles are real! There isn't a wide interest in poetry; publishers seem hesitant to invest in our product because it isn't going to make them very much moolah. That's frustrating as hell. It seems like we're trying to sell snowcone poems to the Eskimos door- to -door, or hocking dark poetry collections on eight-track tapes at conventions. There are a bunch of us bananas of dark poetry doing what we do. Some are pretty amazing, some are selling snake oil, and some are giving poetry a bad name. It's a jungle out there. Organizations like the HWA are instrumental to marketing and schmoozing, they introduce us to other poets and their styles. They are keeping the craft alive to be sure. Let's see,

as far as achievements I'd have to say that having three collections published so far is pretty awesome, and I've read my goodies to some of the top names in the horror business, I've had my short fiction turned into audio podcasts three times at a dot com called The Wicked Library, I've made it into three of the five HWA Poetry Showcases and I scared a bunch of little kiddes who, terrified, ran right out of a library reading I did. That was pretty satisfying.

Q: *Going to the mechanics of form and style. I make no bones that my two biggest "beefs" with dark poetry are the over use of cliché and a misunderstanding of meter. Second to those is the need for poetic lyricism to distinguish poetry from prose. What are your thoughts on this and what do you do to try to avoid falling into any of these traps?*

Bovenmyer: My poetry is character and narrative-driven. I think of them as microstories, and I feel my way through the meter and lyricism by reading each piece aloud again and again while drafting. If it sounds like a poem, has music and rhythm and a specific subtle, muted, artful feeling that's hard for me to describe, it's a poem. If it doesn't, it becomes microfiction or prose poetry and I polish it as such, bringing out the suggested feelings much more strongly and underscoring the narrative structure. That structure and heavier hand becomes "story" for me rather than poem, but there's a lot of grey between the two forms. I feel new to poetry and as though I have much to learn about traditional poetry forms, so I see this as an area of growth for me.

Rozinski: The overuse of cliché in dark poetry is partly due to some stereotypical elements of horror that may at times be difficult to avoid: we all swim in the same pool of offerings of horror films and publications that can contain stock monsters or crude variations of them that include but in no way are limited to zombies, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, witches, and serial killers. The challenge is to come up with something that lies outside the well-worn tropes, or reconstitutes those tropes into new, freshly squeezed forms. Apart from stale subjects, other clichés can occur with images or descriptions that seem overly familiar and tired. What you bring to your poetry that makes it uniquely your own is the incorporation of your personal experience, your particular areas of interest and emphasis, and your imaginative interpretations and impressions of those things. These ingredients are the recipe that gives your poems a flavor that is recognizably different from the poetry of others, part of your poetic. I think there are other avenues to explore to expand what may be conventionally dark and horror poetry. One example is the "new weird" (although it's not that new anymore), where the divisions between the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and supernatural fantasy are broken down and reconstituted. Reading outside the horror genre is another way to get a different perspective and bring something new and different into the writing of one's poetry.

Lyricism is a quality that may become part of a poet's poetic as he/she evolves, a poetic sensibility in which heightened emotional qualities are expressed in a way that is reflective of feelings that come from deeper, richer, more inspired parts of our psyche. Lyrical dark poetry can evoke deep or heightened feelings that touch on the human condition, states such as fear, horror, a profound sense of sadness, or awe. The poem itself may contain lyrical elements from the beginning, depending how what the process was for that particular poem in which the poet got his/her first impressions or content of the poem. Perhaps an example might be that the poet gets a line or lines that seem suggestive of part of a dramatic monologue, which lends itself to a sense of self-expression that is heightened in tone and emotion. From there, the poet's sensitivity to the nuances of language and to the availability and use of poetic devices will be needed to shape the poem in a way that is consistent in tone and elevates it above the level of ordinary prose, although from a strict standpoint, unmetered verse—or free verse—is prose. That being the case, we'll just have to use whatever other poetic devices we may and make it approximate verse in the ways we choose.

Those who are able to write formal poems well, poems that adhere to strict use of meter and rhyme schemes deserve respect and applause. We all come to written work with our own experiences and preferences as a reader, which influence our receptiveness to literature, and, by extension, poetry. Some people have a talent for constructing poetry using traditional forms well, and the best of it is powerful and resonates deeply in the reader. The mind has its own organizational pattern, and other tools to achieve a poetic effect. Lewis Turco defines the fiction writer in his book *The New Book of Forms* as the "artist of written narrative," while the poet is the "artist of language" itself. Speculative poetry would seem to be a creature between two worlds in that respect (if it were written in traditional form—otherwise, technically, it would be speculative free verse). But obviously, many people don't make that distinction, and they regard free verse as a type of poetry. I've never been specifically rejected because the work I submitted to an editor seeking poetry for their publication was written in free verse.

Shrader: Is this saying anything new? How else can this be said? Those are two questions I ask when working through revisions. Workshops, poetry swaps, and revising all help stave off stating the obvious or clichéd. To the second question, I seldom write prose poems but I do think my background in poetry influences a minimalist tendency when I write fiction.

Rubin: I do MY thing, which is story-telling with metered verse, and the experimentation of word and or line placement on the page. I try to infuse in my poetry new and exciting sounds and combinations of form and meter. I try to make good spooky-spooky.

As I said before, there are poets of every ilk that have good poetry and shit poetry. Those are the snake oil salesman. There are those poets who specialize in verse that seem like they're trying too hard to impress the reader with their amazing vernacular and the most obscure pre-Victorian words they can find to try to rhyme. Poetry is very subjective. I personally don't get a lot of what a poet is trying to convey to the reader with free verse, if there's no story element to it. I have to feel something from those obscure sentence fragments on the page. I feel that a poem should either move you in some shared empathetic symbiosis, it should amuse, it should entertain, it should convey a message in a clever use of the almighty word. If it doesn't do all of those things simultaneously, its prose. As a side note, the use of slashes or back slashes between sentence fragments does not make a paragraph of gibberish a poem, IN MY HUMBLE AND POSSIBLY WORTHLESS OPINION.

Q: *I also see some tension in dark poetry between “traditional” (metered and rhyming) poetry and more “modern” poetry (free verse as an example). I have met some traditional poets who decry free verse as some heretical aberration. I have met other poets who feel that the traditional poems written contemporaneous are so poorly written that they just won't try to read such poems. Do you have a preference and if so why and what do you do to prove critics of either form wrong?*

Bovenmyer: Most of my poetry is free verse. I have discovered a recent love of forms through taking an online poetry class from the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. The Lovecraft-inspired pantoum “Pseudopod” was first drafted as homework for this class. Otherwise, almost all of my poetry is free verse hung around breaks and structures that lend something to the narrative. I love reading all kinds of poetry and learn something from every poem I read. I don't feel ashamed of what I enjoy and don't allow critics to ruin my fun—I simply agree to disagree. I believe this skill was finely honed in high school because I walked through the corridors wearing a Spock shirt reading Tad William's *The Dragonbone Chair* and couldn't have cared less that almost no one else in my school liked these things at all.

Rozinski: This is a classic dichotomous argument reflected in Robert Frost's claim that “writing free verse is like playing with the net down,” whereas Charles Wright disagreed with Frost's characterization, suggesting that writing free verse was more like walking a tightrope without a net below. I feel that there's certainly room under the poetry tent for both. There are poets who choose to write both traditional and modern forms and do so beautifully. I haven't tried to write much poetry using strict meter and rhyming schemes, so free verse is what I feel best expresses what I want to say in a poem by the means I choose, mainly because it is the way that lines come to me. Sometimes I've written poetry in a rhyme scheme if it seemed more appropriate given the content or the effect I wanted it to have, but I'm less concerned with meter, though I will work to effect rhythm in poems. I mostly write free verse. Free verse and other modern poetic forms can use the remaining range of poetic devices to create poetic effects. And ultimately, form should serve the needs of the poem (and, by extension, the poet), not the other way around.

I suppose my choice to primarily write free verse is because, for me, it seems to allow me to have a more direct and immediate approach to writing poetry and gives me the freedom to focus on other aspects of composition along with other, more organic poetic devices that might come into play while I'm working on it or reworking it. That being said, when traditional forms are done well, I enjoy reading and hearing them performed. They have a unique power all their own that simply can't be achieved the same way in free verse.

Shrader: I primarily write free verse, though I write (or at least dabble) with some forms. I also read a lot of free verse but have come across more than one sestina that blows my mind, too. I'm for more poetry of all types (and fewer dichotomies, in general).

Rubin: Are you trying to get me to lose all my poet friends? I prefer my poems over anyone else's. I feel closest to them. They are like my children all dressed in their Sunday best and I'm presenting them to the reader, introducing them as offspring I am THE most proud of. I have nothing against any other style of poetry. One either likes it or they scratch their heads and say, "WTF did I just read?"

Q: *Tell me about the path you are hoping to follow in poetry and where you hope to be in the next 5 years.*

Bovenmyer: I hope to continue to learn and grow as a poet by reading poetry regularly, participating in HWA and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association events, slowly growing my craft poem by poem. Because I use writing to heal, I have a rich amount of childhood trauma to unpack right alongside recent divorce and breast cancer traumas. In five years, I suspect my poetry will continue to examine belonging and pain and escape. Five years from now I hope to have produced enough quality material for a chapbook. This will dovetail well with my aspirations to complete drafting on a second novel, because poetry is a nice break from my writing of long forms as well as teaching writing for two different colleges.

Rozinski: As far as I can see, I will remain committed to poetry. After you've sought publication and stayed with it for a while, acceptances still give you a thrill and are a tangible reward for your work. But when the muse suddenly appears out of nowhere and tosses you a line or more of a potential poem, or a breakthrough in poem that's been resisting your efforts to finish it lays its hands on you like a sweet benediction, these are the actual experiences that make everything worthwhile, because it the magic of creativity in action, and it means I still have the ability to surprise myself. And there's a joy in that.

I've had about twenty-five poems accepted for publication to date, with more out there making their rounds, so I'm approaching a number that would be acceptable for a chapbook, but not a collection yet. I've read the works of other dark poets who've written poetry collections that are collected around a subject, a theme, or a character, and I'd like to try my hand at that down the road. I feel fairly confident that I will be able to have a poetry collection published in the next five years. If I can get a bit more productive without it negatively affecting the quality of what I'm doing, maybe I could put out two collections in five years. But I think it may ultimately depend on my muse. Whenever she decides to dance with me, she picks the tunes, she takes the lead, and I just try not to step on her feet or my own in the process.

Shrader: I'm working on two manuscripts of new poems on two very different themes. So first off, I'm striving to get the works to be at their strongest as individual poems and also as sets. Focusing on order and sequence in a collection takes a different sort of attention than editing the pieces individually, and for me a lot more patience. So improving my juggling skills will be part of the next few years.

Rubin: I'd be happy just to be alive in five years, honestly. I would love to be The Poet Laureate of the HWA if they ever see fit to come out with such an honor. I want to make more speculative poetry for children and have my dark and spooky poems in the KIDS section of every public library. I want to develop more themed collections and place my poetry in every "white whale" market I've as yet not been able to break into. The five year path is full of amazing forks I want to explore and conquer. I would love to have my dark tales made into animated cartoons.

Q: "Slam" Poetry has certainly created a renaissance in public interest in poetry. Do you see possibilities for slam poetry in the speculative poetry field? Have you dabbled in this yet?

Bovenmyer: Yes, my poem about the Sad Puppies, "Keep Hugo Stormed," which was in Eye to the Telescope's issue about families, is very much slam. I have a few other poems meant to be read aloud with the slam passion and energy. I think slam is perfectly relevant for speculative poetry, though I think the poet will have a challenge to transmit the vibrating energy of slam while exploring the intellectual and retrospective space genre poetry often visits.

Rozinski: I am open to poetry slams vehicles for promoting speculative poetry, although I myself know little about it. I've seen some poetry slam performances on YouTube. There is the potential for speculative poets who are charismatic and gifted in performing (or have their work performed by others who are) to have success in this area.

As for me, I don't have those acting skills that seem to be a requirement for what is popular with the poetry slam format. If the poetry is good and the poets have a talent for performing it, I'd certainly be interested in attending a slam as a spectator.

My process of writing poetry is monkish. I don't listen to music for inspiration. I require quiet. I do read the poem I'm working on aloud to myself at certain points of composition to get a feel for how it sounds when it is expressed, or even as a spur when I feel stuck, hoping that in the reading of it inertia will act to reveal what is to come next. I have few opportunities to read my poems aloud to others; I don't belong to a poetry group in which members read their work to each other. I'm still nervous when reading my poems to an audience. But there's no remedy for it except to commit to do it when there is an opportunity with the hope that over time the nervousness will lessen. Social anxiety? Introversion? At any rate, a poet having either condition who would then attempt to perform at poetry slam seems to me to be an act akin to jumping into the mouth of an abyss.

Shrader: It may be fair to say that some speculative poetry is probably happening in the slam scene already, depending on how one defines it. I love what slams do. Personally, the idea of points and competition is less exciting to me than the fact that slams get tens of thousands of people into poetry. I have not participated in a slam as a poet, but I do volunteer with an organization connecting youth with poetry slams. To see the kind of life-changing experience that can be has been incredible. The social relevance of giving voice to experience, learning craft and performance techniques- it definitely generates an excitement for poetry that is infectious.

Rubin: Slam Poetry is awesome and I applaud those people who can, first and foremost, get up before an audience of live people, then recite from memory, poems with such force and passion, such excitement and conviction, and elicit such a powerful audience response. Wow! What a gift! I would love to be able to perform like that. As it stands I can barely remember the titles of my poetry let alone recite each line from memory.

Poems by Karen Bovenmyer:

PSEUDOPOD

After Lovecraft's Dunwich Horror

*The skin was thickly covered with coarse black fur,
and from the abdomen a score of long
greenish-grey tentacles with red
sucking mouths protruded limply*

And from the abdomen a score of long
cries reverberated in the air, shivering with
sucking mouths protruding limply
kissing empty air with flinching passion

Cries reverberated in the air, shivering with
love, yearning for touch
kissing empty air with passion flinching
Reaching like me, unanswered

Love, yearning for touch
My hand lifted
Reaching, unanswered, like me
until we touched, stroking gently

My hand lifted
Tentacle coiling, uncoiling

and we answered, stroking gently
each skin thickly covered with coarse black fur

Karen Bovenmyer earned an MFA in Creative Writing: Popular Fiction from the University of Southern Maine. She teaches and mentors students at Iowa State University and Western Technical College. She is the 2016 recipient of the Horror Writers Association Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley Scholarship. Her poems, short stories and novellas appear in more than 40 publications and her first novel, *SWIFT FOR THE SUN*, debuted in 2017. <http://karenbovenmyer.com/>

Poems by Allan Rozinski:

Doll

The uncovered face is
grayed porcelain, worn with abuse,
a concave cheek cracked and splintered,
and above, one eye gone, now a yawning cavity
holding the promise of latent menace,
the remaining eye staring as fixedly
as a sibyl channeling prophecies
of secret horrors
hidden behind a sphynx's grin.

Naked and neutral in gender
save for faint traces of the feminine—
long lashes accentuating the eye and
the faint cherry cast to plumpened lips—
unkempt hair singed and wilted, a wild wreath,
its dirt-smudged and roughly scuffed skin
covered in a warped medley of
blisters and melted patches borne
from aborted offerings to
consuming fires,
unveiled from its makeshift shroud,
a dark totem for the lost children.

Though wordless, it somehow
speaks to her in a language
she imagines sounds like
the familiar music
of her true mother tongue,
sweetly grating the ear like
the songs of knives
cutting through yielding flesh
into solid bone,
or the silent perfection of
soft machines rendered hard
and motionless, no longer
needing to defend
or flee or fear.

The Horror Writer's Association Poetry Showcase, Volume IV, October 2017.

In the Labyrinth

Suddenly, it occurs to you
that you are lost,
instinctively searching for the way
to the center, which is surely
where the resolution must lie;
except, this is not a child's game,
a maze on paper
to be studied at leisure from
an aerial vantage point,
with moves then safely taken
by a graphite proxy, pressing
on to the reward of a
clear outcome or
a clean exit.

You fear
you have again forgotten
that you are in the labyrinth:
you wake
to the familiar feeling of distress,
that tremulous state of unsettledness,
as seeming walls press in on you
& all that remains is inertia
& the blind faith that
forward movement
toward the puzzle's
uncertain end
will reveal the mystery
that lies at its core.

If only like Theseus
you had Ariadne's thread
to retrace your steps
back to the beginning,
you could turn now &
escape the maze
altogether.

But there is no one event, no
single locus of origin
that can be identified as
the source; you come to realize
that you've always been
in the labyrinth,
the mythical menace
of the Minotaur within
an inseparable part of
the paradox of your existence,
trapped as you are
in a dualistic dance,
ever removed from
each other's view,

the maze teasing you along
other passageways
holding the promise of
freedom that instead
arrive at the dead ends of illusion,
forcing you to backtrack
& choose yet another corridor,
until you finally arrive,
somehow surprised
at the fate that was inevitable,
delivered unto hopeful oblivion
that lies in the heart
of the Minotaur's lair.

Eternal Haunted Summer, Winter Solstice Issue, December 2017.

Poems by E.F. Shrader:

Brown Recluse

How I envy your
hard exterior

the stillness
of a small life
spent retreating
to that loose,
milk-white web
of your own design.

Self sufficiency mapped
by a fine woven urge
to hide, to nest.

Then, of course,
your bite.

E. F. Shrader: Ethicist, poet, and speculative writer E. F. Schraeder is the author of two poetry chapbooks, most recently *Chapter Eleven* (Partisan Press). Schraeder's creative work has appeared in many journals and anthologies including *Glitterwolf*, *The Were Traveler*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *Lavender Review*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *The Feminist Wire*, and others. Schraeder's interdisciplinary Ph.D. emphasized applied ethics, and Dr. Schraeder's current projects include a queer monster's coming of age novella, and two manuscripts of new poems. Visit efschraeder.com for news.

Poems by Randy D. Rubin

Vampire Cream

The evil demon breathed in steam.

It seemed to be a fever dream

that pealed a really screeching scream
or squeal, revealing me asleep. I seem
to feel a heat in my bloodstream
and a need to feed on Vampire Cream.

This Garden of Eaten

Go on, take a bite!

I am both the apple
and the serpent.

You took my Eve from me
while she slept;
while I stepped

outside this unholy, undead place,
this Garden of Eaten
and I wept.

In a single day my life has changed:

You bit her in the morning
and she turned to rotted fruit,
forbidden fruit, by afternoon.

In twilight there was no more Eve.

No more Eve-nings spent with her in paradise—

Only darkest, undead night.

Go on, take a bite
of my Adam's apple.

Join me in this Garden of Eaten.

Randy D. Rubin lives in quiet lunacy with his dog daughter Eva Larue in a very old haunted house in Virginia. He is a proud member of The Horror Writers of America and HWA-VA. He matriculated from Old Dominion University studying Creative Writing/English. His third collection of dark poetry, *MEANDERINGS OF A DARK AND LONELY CYCLE PATH (ER... UM... PSYCHOPATH)* can be found at Amazon Books under his name. Look for him in the HWA Poetry Showcase V coming soon.