

Featured Poets Spotlight – HWA Poetry Showcase Featured Poets

By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron* (Weasel Press 2018)

A long time ago now multiple Bram Stoker nominated author Peter Salomon approached the late Rocky Wood, then president of the HWA, about a new venue to highlight the poetic talents of the HWA. Peter's idea was to have the HWA publish a showcase of not just poets but also to encourage all HWA members to explore their poetic abilities. As Peter told me Wood was very enthusiastic about this proposal and enthusiastically directed Peter to move forward. This project became the HWA Poetry Showcase which is now publishing it's seventh volume of the series. The series can be found at https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0753JH32N?searchxofy=true&ref=db_s_aps_series_rwt. Each volume has reached "bestselling" levels on Amazon's system for poetry and horror poetry. Peter was the editor for Volumes I and II which originally were digital. I edited Volumes III and IV. The original idea was a digital only publication but with prodding from Peter and me, and former President Lisa Morton's blessing, the series also became a hard copy publication. John Palisano, the current HWA President, was pivotal in preparing the earlier volumes for publication on the Amazon system. The HWA continues this devotion and support for the series with Bram Stoker Award winning author and editor Stephanie M. Wytovich as editor

of Volumes V and VI and now the upcoming Volume VII. The latest volume, featuring a beautiful cover by Robert Cabeen, carries forward Rocky Wood's devotion to and support for poetry. Ms. Wytovich along with her judges, poet Carina Bisset and multiple Bram Stoker winning fiction author Gwendolyn Kiste, have selected what they chose to be the three poems and poets as "featured" for the volume which has been the tradition of the series. This year the featured poets are



Sarah Read



K.P. Kulski



Sara Tantlinger

The poems these three submitted are rich in use of language, imagery and of course evoke abundant creepy and dark feelings in any Reader.

Q: Ms. Read, you won the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in a First Novel for *The Bone Weaver's Orchard* (Trepidatio Publishing). Ms. Kulski your debut novel *Fairest Flesh* is about to be released

by Rooster Republic Press, though you do have a background in poetry as well. Ms. Tantlinger, your Bram Stoker Award in 2019 was for your poetry collection about serial killer H. H. Holmes *The Devil's Dreamland* (StrangeHouse Books 2018) but in 2020 but your novella *To Be Devoured* (Unnerving 2019) earned a Bram Stoker nomination in long fiction. Each of you have very strong roots in fiction but certainly excelled with your poems appearing in Volume VII. What has drawn you to dark poetry? Do you write poetry regularly and if so what inspirations do you draw from? Do you think that your work in poetry furthers your fiction writing or the other way around?

Read: My first forays into writing were actually in poetry. I had a number of poems published when I was a teen--all also very dark! I do still write it regularly, but often just for myself. It's a form of meditation for me. I definitely think I use poetry to write fiction, taking into account the sound and shape of sentences and building layers of meaning into things. My fiction is also pretty heavy on metaphor and symbolism. I think that's part of the fun of writing it.

Kulski: To me, the darkness is the poetry. It is yearning and sorrow, all those things that are whispered into the lurking corners of the human existence. A tendril that allows the writer to reach out and evoke emotion directly in the Reader. The work of the great Ancient Greek poet, Sappho, is one

of my favorites. What we have today of her poetry comes to us in fragments, but those fragments are powerful things. It amazes me that she lived over two-thousand years ago and yet still has the power to reach into my soul with only a few lines. Utter magic.

I started writing poetry as a child, mostly as a coping mechanism. If anything, poetry came first and fiction followed. As a kid, I taped poems from Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath all over my bedroom walls. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" in particular, holds a great deal of meaning. I continue to write poetry as an outlet. Much of it is personal. I would say that my fiction is fueled by poetry. Fiction is like a symphony of poetry strung together to create a larger or more complex truth. I usually strive to bring that emotion to the forefront, to reach out, like Sappho and make the Reader feel.

Tantlinger: I absolutely think writing poetry can strengthen one's prose -- I actually taught a brief module on that very subject for a graduate school class, and I hope to develop it more and maybe teach it through Horror University at a future StokerCon. I've always loved poetry, whether it was classic like Edgar Allan Poe or something contemporary like Sierra DeMulder. That challenge of learning to say so much, to convey an entire story in a matter of stanzas and carefully selected words continues to be something I enjoy

tackling. I'm inspired by everything when it comes to poetry. I particularly love taking something beautiful in nature and exploring its dark side; the planet is so vast and mysterious, it's an amazing place of constant inspiration.

Q: Tell us about the specific poems you submitted. How did the ideas for your poem come to mind and describe what you wanted the Reader to experience from your work?

Read: My poem is about being silenced in the guise of being nurtured. I wanted the reader to feel that sense of choking. It's about being the nest that has to keep everyone safe, the perch that holds them up, but also the egg, and the thing inside struggling to emerge. It's about emerging, only to have to swallow someone else's bile. The bird here performs motherhood, oblivious to the damage done.

Kulski: I wrote "Shatter" while knee-deep in editing my novel, *Fairest Flesh*. Anyone who reads the novel and the poem will note that they echo similar themes. Fairy tales instruct women to wait for their "prince" the hero that will save them from oppression, drudgery and even death. Yet isn't the evil queen/stepmother/witch an extension of that wait? She's the evidence that the wait doesn't work and there is no savior except oneself. Snow White is a life stage,

as is the Evil Queen. To own our lives, we need to stop being at war with ourselves, whether that be our past, present or future.

Shatter that mirror of impossible beauty standards. Shatter that glass ceiling that promises the sky but never delivers.

Tantlinger: I've been playing around more with cosmic horror in my poetry and I knew I wanted to do something with constellations. The contrast of light and dark is a classic theme, and I find myself drawn to it often. I used those ideas and tried to create something a little different than just the simple of idea of light through stars against the darkness of space. I love body horror, too, so that definitely crept its way into the poem -- the intimacy of the light and dark that dwells in all of us is often a theme in my writing.

Q: Why did you decide to submit to this year's Showcase? What was your experience with the jury and editor in the submission and selection process?

Read: I've been thinking about submitting for years, and I finally got my act together! Stephanie is such an amazing poet, and Gwendolyn and Carina are some of my favorite

writers, too. It's an honor to work with them. The entire team has been lovely and wonderful.

Kulski: Submitting to the Showcase was a toe-dip into the waters of dark poetry publication. I wanted to share more of my poetry and this is such a lovely opportunity. I felt I needed to see what would come of submitting. Thank you for the opportunity!

Tantlinger: I love the showcase so much! My first acceptance into it was Volume II, edited by the wonderful Peter Adam Salomon. After that, I unfortunately missed the deadlines for the next volumes and was always furious at myself for missing the calls, so I really try to pay attention now and submit each year. The entire anthology is a brilliant way to find new voices in poetry, and I think it also pushes HWA members who don't often write poetry to try their hand at submitting; I love when that happens, and reading the sampling of each writer's voice through the different poems makes for a great collection.

Q: Have you found your membership in the HWA to be beneficial to either help you promote your poetic works or to help you as a poet in your craft?

Read: I would likely not have submitted my poetry at all if I hadn't been prompted to by the HWA showcase opportunity. Reading other members' work has been really inspiring, and I'm very excited to share a table of contents with so many of the horror poets I admire so much.

Kulski: HWA membership has been so helpful in connecting with other writers. I've found it to be a wonderfully supportive community that are ready to encourage and share their knowledge of the industry. This very experience, being selected to be featured for the Showcase is evidence of the interest of the HWA to promote dark poets.

Tantlinger: Definitely! My membership has been invaluable -- the friendships I've built, the horror family I've found here, it's impossible to properly put into words how much that means. Poetry has not always been regarded as highly as it should, or paid as well as it needs to be professionally, but having the HWA Showcase and the other efforts the HWA has taken to spotlight poetry are extraordinary steps in helping writers find their voices through poetry. I am eternally grateful to HWA members like Linda Addison and Mike Arnzen who have been particularly inspirational and supportive in helping me become a stronger poet.

**Here are your poems selected as featured poems for
Volume VII:**

Throat Stars

by Sara Tantlinger

Yellow bulb, warm against dry lips
heat sucked into chapped cracks,
I place the light on my tongue,
close my mouth, crunch glass shards
into bite-sized electric razors

laughter escapes
the bleeding grotto of my throat

beams slide down my luminescent body,
I imagine glass replaced by stars
bursting their edges around my molars

sharpening themselves into a galaxy
that has come to live inside my mouth
to create constellations
from my scarlet tongue and gums

blood so thick, it congeals to black,
tarring my jaw shut, forever sealing in
all that light -- a chewed up tonic

of personal dusk, of crystalized stars

slippery from saliva and gore,
remaining light blinks, scattering dim
hope into complete darkness, raven
abyss disguised as eternal ethers,

at last, the cosmos take me home.

Mother Yolk

by Sarah Read

Her teeth are bird's toes, clutching
And my lips the twig that holds her.
A kiss, but sharper.
And I'd speak, if I could,
Tell her to let go,
fly away.
But she has nested in my mouth.
My tongue is her egg.
She'll hold it down, warm it,
Incubate till that crack
Of something opening,
A hatch hatchery hatching
A thing lacking feathers
With claws of its own.
I'll speak, then.
Cry to be fed

Whatever it is she's
Holding in her throat
for me.

Shatter

by K.P. Kulski

Gazing at yourself again, tracking the marks
of tears
That estuary of worry, flowing from all the things you
were meant to be.

You were not.

Instead you were red rage, heat of slow burning embers
that ignited your flesh, drooped fair lips into a perpetual
scowl. Little wings flapping at the corners, riding the
wind.

Sweet morsel of the past, ready to be served and stabbed
and carved,
stretched,
white knuckled, holding onto what was left.

“Mirror, mirror,” you say. “Who’s the fairest of them
all?” My mouth, the tongue curving around the sour word.
Fairest.

I hate you now.

You should be wrinkled and joyful. Laughing with the
rolls of a good life.

Gardening, or knitting.

Isn't that what those too far past their sell-by date do?

Work their hands into the setting sun, buried in soil or
yarn so the guilt of what they were once is covered

let the ants and worms have them, these claws, let
them eat up the fleshy warts.

The truth is that you never ran into the woods, were never
taken pity on, or saved or loved.

You rotted.

Stare at yourself, the melted figure you've become. There
was nothing sweet but youth and potential and dreams.

And now you've waited too long to race away. To let
your hair whip your beauty in the woods where the
animals eat their young,

the old, the weak, the dying.

Those in the castle eat all these too.

As do dwarves in cottages.

Princes who consume and belch and vomit. Then do it all
over again.

“Mirror, mirror.” I’m looking forward at you and you,
back at me.

You’ll only find coals where our eyes were once.
Rejected Christmas gifts. Bad little girl.

Get rid of them now, before it’s too late. Smash them with
hammers, tip them to shatter over the floor.

And don’t you dare sweep the splinters up. Let them
glitter, a prism of falsehoods. Of all the should haves.
Little splinters of glass and lies. Pretty when the beauty
dies.

Oh, to hell with mirrors.

Bios:

Sarah Read is a dark fiction writer in the frozen north of Wisconsin. Her short stories can be found in various places, including Ellen Datlow’s Best Horror of the Year vols 10 and 12. A collection of her short fiction called **OUT OF WATER** is available now from Trepidatio Publishing, as is her debut novel **THE BONE WEAVER’S ORCHARD**, both nominated for the Bram Stoker Awards. When she’s not staring into the abyss, she knits. You can

find her online on Instagram or Twitter @inkwellmonster or on her site at www.inkwellmonster.wordpress.com.

K.P. Kulski. As the daughter of a Korean mother and Massachusetts father, K.P. inherited a complex identity. Born in Hawaii, her military family continually moved throughout the United States. She later served in both the Navy and Air Force, a journey that took her to Japan and full circle back to Hawaii. K.P. holds an MFA in Writing Popular Fiction and MA in Ancient and Classical History. She teaches college history and now resides in Northeast Ohio. More info can be found at garnetonwinter.com.

Sara Tantlinger is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *The Devil's Dreamland: Poetry Inspired by H.H. Holmes*. She is a poetry editor for the Oddville Press, a graduate of Seton Hill's MFA program, a member of the SFPA, and an active member of the HWA. Along with being a mentor for the HWA Mentorship Program, she is also a co-organizer for the HWA Pittsburgh Chapter. Her other books include *Love for Slaughter*, *The Devil's City*, and *To Be Devoured* (nominated for the Bram Stoker Award in Long Fiction), and she edited the anthology *Not All Monsters*, out with Strangehouse Books. She embraces all things macabre and can be found lurking in graveyards or on Twitter @SaraTantlinger and at saratantlinger.com.