

NIGHTMARES AND HAIKU: AN INTERVIEW WITH BRAM STOKER AWARD WINNING POET CHRISTINA SNG

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Christina Sng is the first citizen of Singapore to be awarded the Bram Stoker Prize for Superior Achievement in Poetry for **A Collection of Nightmares** (Raw Dog Screaming Press 2017). Multiple Bram Stoker winner and HWA Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient Linda Addison described this book as “...a magic quilt of surreal and unique portraits turning the stuff of nightmares and pain into beautiful, even when bloody, images of release and redemption. Bram Stoker Winning Poet Michael Arnzen called this book a “brilliantly twisted collection, sure to turn a number of heads.” Ms. Sng’s chapbook *Astropoetry* (Alban Lake Publishing) was the second prize winner for the Elgin Award in the chapbook category in 2018. Her other chapbook collections include *The Darkside of Eden* (Allegra Press, 2002), *Angelflesh* (Sam’s Dot Publishing, 2002), and *Dark Dreams* (Naked Snake Press, 2006; Smashwords, 2011).

Ms. Sng’s poems can be found in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *Aoife’s Kiss*, *Bare Bone*, *Black Petals*, *Blood Rose*, *ChiZine*, *Dark Animus*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Flesh & Blood*, *Hadrosaur Tales*, *The Journal*,

Lunatic Chameleon, The Martian Wave, Mythic Delirium, The Pedestal Magazine, Penumbria, Poe Little Thing, Space & Time, Star*Line, Story House, Tales of the Talisman, Wicked Hollow, and Yellow Bat Review and many other publications.

Q: Welcome and thank you for being here Christina. You've been interviewed many times over the past two years so I want to skip over the usual easy questions. This blog focuses on dark poetry and the art of dark poetry. I'd like you to help your fellow poets understand your creative process. Which type of poet are you? The "inspirational" poet who only writes from inspiration or the type of poet that sets out each day to write regardless of inspiration. While this brings to mind a comparison of Orpheus at his lyre and Jack Torrance typing away at that typewriter as the ghosts swirl around him most poets seem to fall within this spectrum.

A: Thank you for inviting me, David. Over my writing career, I've been both types of poet. Lately, I am more of the latter. Inspiration doesn't occur whenever I want it to anymore. Prompts help immensely in this regard. Still, when I am driven by awe or rage, the poems and stories often spill over and flourish.

Q: I remember being told that you have published up to 700 poems. Many are very short — haiku or other short forms. I've read different statements of yours in prior interviews as to why you prefer such poems. In one you mention that you often have such little time to write (raising children and other obligations) that the shorter form allows you to "carve out a tiny story in 3 to 5 lines." In other instances you mentioned that the brevity of

your poems “reflects the little time we have on this world.” Are there any other influences you think may have steered you to this form? Cultural or literary or otherwise.

A. My attention span has vastly shortened over the years with caregiving and only the night and scattered moments in the day to write. I do find great beauty in the brevity of a story, how a few words can weave a tale with so much left unspoken, an art form influenced by the difficulty of focusing on creating over the din of life.

Q: Do you have a methodology you like to follow when editing a short poem? For example in your haiku *The Path* there is mixture of traditional form (focusing on nature) and the image of veins as a path of some type (invoking a more darker tone, even some type of addiction)

forest path
tracing the veins
on her hand

These words appear carefully chosen. Is this something that simply pops in your head or do you spend any length of time in the editing process. Given the brevity of haiku how do you decide which of the 10 or so words in each such poems will stay or be replaced?

A: As I have no formal training in poetry, I write instinctively, penning what comes to mind and afterwards, editing it by reading the poem out to hear if it sounds right, if each word fits.

There's a feeling of completeness when it is done, like a jigsaw puzzle.

Q: In 2004 your words appear in a rather strange tome called *The Life and Times of Hertzian Chimera* in an interview entitled "Of Blood Suckers and Winged Things". In doing my research for this interview I read a number of your interviews. This one was by far the most out of this world and interesting filled with odd and borderline erotic imaginings by Chimera involving you and him which turn out to be a dream and a prelude to an interview that never really happens. At one point he describes you as dropping "a recently decapitated head of a shell-shocked college girl." The playful imaginings of his narrative aside he references some very interesting statements from you I'd like to explore. Hertzian quotes you as saying you were "born in a haunted house, where the tortured souls of wartime horror whispered to me as I lay in my crib." You also state that in each shadow of this house "lived a friend." If this is indeed true tell us of this experience and whether you think it helped to mold your writing. Do you include memories (poetically and/or appropriately licensed) of your early childhood into your works?

A: The home I grew up in was situated opposite a World War II torture chamber. Long had there been rumors about it being haunted, with one aunt refusing to ever return when she saw a spectre and another hearing chains being dragged down the hallway. You can imagine what effect this had on a child. It was a shadowy apartment unit on the ground floor and I was often left to play by myself in the large bedroom my siblings and I shared. It was sectioned in parts by tall cupboards that seemed

to loom over me. I had lots of imaginary friends and time to think and ponder about life, which perhaps has influenced how I write and the stories I tell.

Q: In that same interview you are quoted and stating that the horrors “out there” are nothing compared to those “out there on the street wearing human skin.” I have always had a belief that humans are capable of such evil the dark gods take lessons from us. Can you give us some examples of your work where you have attempted to poetically describe this idea involving the dark nature of humankind being more horrific than those of the imagination? Do you think this belief causes you to be darker than you might be otherwise?

A: *The older I get, the more I believe that the monsters we conjure up have nothing on the dark nature of humans. This is reflected in many of my poems and stories. “The Bone Carver”, “Inheritance”, “Annalise”, “The Forest of Discarded Baby Girls”, “Forest Mother”, “The Art of Sewing”, and “The Capacity of Violence” are poems about those who eventually turn on the monsters who maim them. A stalker undergoes extreme body modification to follow his victim into space where she has fled to escape him in “Obsession”, while in “Dark Dragons”, a group of friends celebrate the childhood buddy they murdered out of jealousy, a prequel to a much earlier poem I wrote, “Crimes of our Youth” where the murder eventually comes back to haunt them. Meanwhile, “The Dissection” and “The Old Bones” remind us of the constant wars perpetuated by us against those we consider alien, often not without terrible consequences.*

Q: Sometimes I see hints of a life lived in your work. I cannot tell if the words are just a story by a narrator I do not know or if you are placing yourself partially in the poem. For example in Une Nouvelle Vie published in Lontar #7 2016 you give us a beautiful poem about a father talking to his child about “recycling” his body.

Father tries to comfort me.

“I know you got used

To that body.

But it has now worn out

After a million cycles

In this Universe.”

Then the father figure beckons the child on

He beckons,

“Let us choose

Another Universe,

Another body.

I promise you this,

We will find your mother.

There are countless

Universes to search,

But we have forever.”

This is sentimental and down to earth yet beautiful and full of the heart of speculative poetry. Was a poem like this simply a poetic construct or is there a piece of you in this? If so, do you include a piece of yourself in many of your poems? Any examples you can share with us below?

A: Sometimes, I do. Sometimes, it is a fragment of who I am or who I was or who I might one day be. Other times, it is a character I imagine or a memory of someone I met or read about. for example, “Mirror to the Other Side” has a piece of me in it, while “Exquisite” is a poetic construct.

Q: Have you done much in the way of collaboration? Do you have any such endeavors planned?

A: I haven't done many collaborations. The few I have done were some 20 years ago. I'd love to do more in my later years

when I can commit to the time, but right now, I have nothing planned.

Q: I found a number of positive articles from Singapore based media publications referencing your success. I have read that horror is very popular in Singapore. Is this true? What kind of reception have you had from your homeland?

A: Horror fiction is popular here but horror poetry is still very new and unexplored.

Q: A few years ago I wrote a piece on Asian Zombie Cinema for the Encyclopedia of the Zombie. In my research I saw that each country had its own spin on what we consider archetypical horror creatures — ghosts, zombies, vampires, lycanthropy and witches. Does Singapore provide its own contribution to the genre? Have you used any in your works?

A: We're big on ghosts here. I've written a couple of Singapore-based poems on ghosts like "Ghost Month" and "The Woman in the Coffee Shop".

Q: What can we expect from you coming up?

A: I hope to have another horror collection out this year. My book of short fiction is slowly collecting itself. The novel is still twitching in its foetal stage. My science fiction poetry collection needs another re-read with an abundant amount of coffee, and my haiku collection is sitting pretty, waiting for a fresh set of eyes to give it a final read.

Poems by Christina Sng:

EXQUISITE

You're exquisite.

Stony-white and frozen,
Parched lips curled
In a delicate snarl—
Medusa caught you
Unexpectedly
That day in her town.

Like the snow queen,
You stand tall, beautiful,
A lone figure, still,
In the rage of winter's furore.
Corpuscles flash frozen, all
But oblivious to time's spiral.

Ten millennia later,
You stand proud
In the heart of my garden,
Immune to hail and rain,
The hatred in your eyes
Wilts the flora in your plane.

Yes, you'd inherited that
From her gaze.
Very formidable,
I must admit.

And today,
I offer a gift.

See my enemies before you
Silent on the ground,
A nail in each crown.
Beneath you,
They blacken and shrivel,
Fading into the ground.

Gorelets ooze,
Swirling beneath your feet,
A pink milky pool, seeping
Into your stony flesh.
Corpuscles revived
In an amalgamated alchemic mesh.

And then you take a step.

GHOST MONTH

August rain falls lightly
On the summer-scorched soil.

The ghost month is taking its toll,
With spirits about a thousandfold.

They swirl like tendrils unfurled
In a crack-ridden tsunami ride

And feast on the offerings
Laid on the ground, reliving

Their life and death stories
In mists of clouds.

A CAPACITY FOR VIOLENCE

You sewed my lips up
To keep me quiet,
Never imagining
It would only fuel my rage.

You see,
I too have a capacity
For anger and violence,
Kept carefully under control

So the little ones don't see
And don't learn.
But I know now
It was a mistake.

For when I woke up,
Unable to speak or scream,
The thick catgut you used
Ripping my lips to ribbons,

The storm inside me
Finally erupted

And with my bare hands,
I tore you apart.

Yes, adrenaline works like that.
You must have forgotten.

FOREST MOTHER

I return to the roots,
The branches, the leaves,

To the only place
I ever found peace.

In this palace of winds
I am one with the trees,

The crows and the ravens
Bring solace to me.

No devastation from men
With their sticks and knives,

No destruction from those
Labelling me with a price.

Here I am now
With the sticks and stones,

Here I will reduce

Them all into bones.

They will arrive
With their guns and scythes,

Here we will wait
And eat them alive.

MIRROR TO THE OTHER SIDE

Through the mirror
I saw him, translucent
In the forest,

Tiny form bent
Over a dying fawn,
Bringing it back to life.

“So what do you think of
Our Mirror to the Other Side?”
The saleslady asked.

I nodded and smiled, never
Taking my eyes off my boy.
“I’ll take it.”

Acknowledgements:

“Exquisite”, *Exquisite Corpuscle*, 2009

“Ghost Month”, *Space and Time #100*, 2007

“A Capacity for Violence”, *Ladies of Horror Flash Project*,
April 2018

“Forest Mother”, *Ladies of Horror Flash Project*, June 2018

“Mirror to the Other Side”, *Mythic Delirium*, July 2016

Christina Sng is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A COLLECTION OF NIGHTMARES* (Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2017). Her poetry has appeared in numerous venues worldwide and received nominations in the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, and honourable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror and the Best Horror of the Year. Visit her at <http://www.christinasng.com> and connect on social media @christinasng.