

PUTTING ON THE WEIRD — AN INTERVIEW WITH KYLA LEE WARD

By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of Bleeding Saffron

In the Afterword to Kyla Lee Ward's latest collection of Weird Poetry *The Macabre Modern and Other Oddities* (P'rea Press 2019) the noted critic and Lovecraft biographer S. T. Joshi writes that "with each new work she



produces Kyla Lee Ward . . . makes clear why she should be regarded as one of the preeminent exemplars of contemporary weird poetry." Weird Poetry has grown in popularity alongside the rise of the New Formalism movement in poetry. With its roots in H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, George Sterling and perhaps older

classic poets such as Coleridge and Dante, Weird Poets seek to shed the perhaps dominance of free verse in modern poetry. Beyond New Formalism, Weird Verse invokes strong use of meter, rhyme and stylistic language. It relishes the poetry of the arcane and celebrates its emergence into the modern world. Kyla has placed herself at the top of this genre.

I met Kyla at the 2019 Stokercon in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Meeting her was just another reminder why attending the Stokercon is so rewarding. Kyla was one of a small but outstanding contingent attending of authors from Australia and New Zealand influenced by the cold tides of the Southern Ocean. Kyla appeared for an Open Mic session hosted by Linda Addison and literally overwhelmed the audience with an incredible display of formalistic poetry as it should be written and read and a very commanding acting presence.

Kyla is one of a growing cadre of Weird Poets who took root down under. Her publisher, P'rea Press is run by Weird Poet and editor Charles (Danny) Lovecraft who did an outstanding job of editing Kyla's two volumes of verse, *The Land of Bad Dreams* and her latest *The Macabre Modern and Other Morbidities*. Kyla attended Stokercon 2019 as a Stoker nominee for short fiction for *And In Her Eyes The City Drowned*. Kyla is no stranger to honors and accolades having been nominated on multiple occasions for Australia's Ditmar Awards (Australian National Science Fiction Award for science fiction, fantasy and horror). In 2006 Kyla was awarded the prestigious Aurealis Award for best novel for *Prismatic* (with Evan Paliatseas and David Carroll as Edwina Grey). In 2008 she was nominated for the Australian Shadows Award for her non-fiction piece "*A Shared Ambition - Horror Writers in Horror Fiction.*"

Kyla is also an actor and was a member of the

Theatre of Blood repertory company and has written, produced and acted in her own works and short films.

Q: You clearly and unequivocally proclaim yourself to be a writer of the weird. To set things in context tell us what you consider to be weird poetry?

A: Weird is what they called me at school! To a certain mindset, all poetry is weird. That's not what you mean, of course, but poetry does seem, in many ways, to be the natural voice of the unnatural and the numinous. Casting something, a concept, a story, a mood, in verse removes it from the realm of the ordinary, marks it out as significant. Stars sing, bards recall the history of the clan. Priest and sorcerer intone sacred words and names of power: gods and demons respond with prophecy and curse. So, I suppose that to me, weird poetry is work that

intentionally embraces this capacity.

Q: Besides the obvious choices of Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith and George Sterling, often given credit for giving birth to Weird Poetry, what other authors of that genre influenced you?

A: The most important poems I encountered growing up were the old, Romantic ballads like “The Highwayman” and the work of Keats. I adore Keats and his long, Gothic poems such as “The Eve of Saint Agnes” definitely influenced me. But when I go looking, what I find lodged in my head is “The Mewlips” by J. R. R. Tolkien. I don't know that he counts as a weird poet, but there it remains.

“The shadows where the Mewlips dwell,
Are dark and wet as ink,
And slow and softly rings their bell,

As in the slime you sink.”

And then there's Leah Bodine Drake, whom I had to re-discover as an adult to realise it was *she* who described the “Witches on the Heath” dancing to the music of an infernal fiddler.

Q: Does Weird Poetry have to be “Lovecraftian” in order to be “weird?” Does it have to have meter, rhyme and be more formalistic?

A: I do think the word Lovecraftian has become so far diluted these days as to be used as a synonym, in some cases, for weird fiction. Perhaps controversially, I prefer a *much* more limited usage. So limited, in fact, that there are poems I would not describe as Lovecraftian but rather Chambersian - after the mythos Chambers developed in his original King in Yellow tale cycle (with just a little help from

Ambrose Bierce and well before Lovecraft) and the actual poem “Cassilda's Song”. But these poems are most definitely weird in their effect.

Does it have to be formal? Well, remember what I said about poetry being the voice of the unnatural? In my experience, it is a good deal harder to achieve this effect in free verse than with a formal structure, be it balladry, sonnet or what have you.

Harder, but certainly not impossible.

Q: Whom do you consider to be the modern successors to Sterling and Smith?

A: Eek! There are so many excellent poets working today, who display both the vision and passion.

But to my mind, Ann K Schwader must be counted among them for the brilliant way she

has of converting landscape into mindscape. She infuses both the wild—as in “Last Light, Frijoles Canyon” or “Diving Xibalba”—and the urban—as in “Mardi Gras Postmortem” or “Sanguine Tags”—with a piquant sense of what underlies the surface reality. In addition, she is a consummate story-teller, dipping into history to evoke the horrors of “Eating Mummy” and “To The Next Priest”, as well as excellent Lovecraftian pieces which launch from their source material into new terrain. Her sonnet cycle *In Yaddith Time* is a rare achievement.

Bruce Boston and Robert Frazier have produced a gloriously lush body of work centered around the... with pieces like “A Compass For The Mutant Rainforest”, “A Gourmand of the Mutant Rainforest” and “A Missionary of the Mutant Rainforest”. Although it is Boston's Chambersian “She Walks In Yellow To Please Her Lord” that is scored upon my soul. Note, this is also free verse.

Wade German does much with sonnets like “The Black Abbess”, creating a personal mythology around the Smith-inspired Black Hermitage, and his sestina “Prophecy of the Red Death” equals anything I've ever read, especially other sestinas. And, if you are after something to compare with the movement's flagship poems, Sterling's “A Wine of Wizardry” and Smith's “The Emperor of Dreams”, you could do far worse than German's “The Necromantic Wine”.

On a similar note, I must mention Ashley Dioses's mirrored epics “Atop The Crystal Moon” and “On A Dreamland's Moon”. These are tributes, but also their own exquisite/horrific journeys with a very personal sensibility.

K. A. Opperman's “The Angels Are All Corpses In The Sky”, Stephanie Wytovich's witchier pieces like “Naked For Neptune”, Leigh Blackmore's cycle *The Spores From Sharnoth*—there's just no

end.

Q: Many of your poems carry forward the narrative poetry form into the present. Fantasy and horror are story telling. Your poems are story telling. Do you approach all your poetry in this mode or have you written more ambiguous pieces?

A: Story-telling is basically my default mode: I mean, in *any* situation. I'm just wired that way. Something I enjoy very much is writing monologues in the voice of a character telling their own story – pieces like “The Torturer's Confession”, “The Necromancer's Question”, “The Tomb-Robber's Complaint”. Sometimes you can suggest a whole history or myth in a comparatively few lines. Sometimes, as in *The Feast of Mistrust*, it takes longer.

Q: An excellent example of your use of the

narrative poetic structure is in your previous collection *The Land of Bad Dreams*. Several poems in this collection focus on a Dr. Wulf and Lady Webbe. One long piece weaves their stories in a section of the book called The Feast of Mistrust. You graced the section with some of your own illustrations, elaborate depictions of what appears to be the characters joining this “Feast.” Early in Section I (The Fear) you wrote of of Lady Webbe as she walks to her family pew in a church or cathedral

*Lady Webbe can see the dead
her blessing and her curse.
A doom to know what lies below;
to not know would be worse.
She takes all due precautions and with care
her route will choose,
making good use of bridges and unlikely
platform shoes.*

Distinguishing Dr. Wulf’s approach you wrote

*But Doctor Wulf would differ,
in marching up the aisle
with hat and cane, silvery mane
and supercilious smile.
He thinks the style of Lady Webbe is not a
scholar's fancy,
But evinces the usage of the blackest
necromancy.*

The poem richly follows these two through a tapestry of very dark adventures. Was there a source for these two? The story that follows is a wonderful example of narrative poetry. What inspired the very macabre story you laid out in this piece?

A: I honestly don't know *where* they bubbled up from, but Lady Webbe and Doctor Wulf were first incarnated, of all things, as characters in a freeform role-playing game I staged for my 21st

birthday. Note, “freeform” is Australian for a very polite LARP that takes place inside, involving minimal combat. Lady Webb was throwing a masked ball and Dr Wulfe was among the guests. I believe she was a sorceress and he a witch-hunter; I assure you, they evolved considerably in the poem, in their interaction with each other.

As for the poem itself: well, it was the title came first. One particularly miserable Christmas. With it came the image of this medieval city where all pretensions to piety were undermined by what it had cost to build the cathedral. I seem to recall there was going to be more witch-burning, but then Webbe, Wulf and the Bishop just picked up the story and ran off with it.

Q: Also in that same set of poems all the stanzas are sestets with the first and third lines not rhyming but the second and fourth rhyming

and the fifth and sixth rhyming as couplets. Best I count count the syllables in each stanza also seem to work as a form — seven in the first lines, every second and fourth line has six, every third line has eight and fourteen syllables for the fifth and sixth lines. I could not find a similar pattern form in contemporary poetic forms. Did you craft this scheme on your own or did you follow an older pattern from more classic poets?

A: And now I must confess that this is simply the way the first stanza came out. I just tried to keep the rest consistent.

Q: The other striking thing about the form used for Feast of Mistrust was the natural flow of the language you used. That is a very difficult craft for the modern formalistic poet to master. Any insights you can offer to fellow poets trying to craft more formalistic dark poetry on how to accomplish this?

A: One of the benefits of theatrical training is an ear for how things sound, how they are actually spoken. One can bend sense and expression so far towards a set meter and rhyme, but only so far. The two must meet as naturally as possible. This sets a high bar – believe me, I frequently weep and gibber. This is one reason I am so fond of unrhymed iambic pentameter (that and the theatrical training) and have never written a sestina.

So, always read aloud. Even when not composing monologues. Sometimes, I actually write out a poem or parts thereof as prose or plain speech, and get it working like that before massaging it back into the rhyming scheme. It changes, of course it changes, but this does help preserve the flow and the actual sense of what you're saying. Which is essential. If a word rhymes and scans, but doesn't mean what it should in context, there's no point using it. But why should you need to, when there are so, so many other

wonderful words available!

Q: In the early sections of *The Macabre Modern* you depict a series of dialogues between Death (as a character rather than an event) and various people listed by trade or circumstance — the Architect, the Lawyer, the Life Coach, the Musician. In each dialogue Death ceases to be the uncaring settlor of all stations of life but seems to judge those Death will force to join the Danse Macabre forcing some to defend their lives. In the poem *The Manager* death seems to almost mock the store manager's existence

*No question that your work is through
but what exactly did you do?*

The Manager responds to defend the life lived

I managed don't you understand?

But ends with this resignation

I'm worth no more than all the rest.

This interplay using Death as a commentator on the lives he takes is an interesting concept. Typically ancient religions differentiated between Death and the judges of the dead. If Death is not judging then Death is certainly putting some of these folks in their place, even cruelly so as to question the value of their existence. Death makes these comments but yet in the end makes clear that *“All classes are alike to me, the only true equality.”* Death seems to taunt the characters while making them join the great danse macabre? The modern social commentary is telling as well.

Some of this dialogue appears to mirror your discussion in the essay appearing later in this collection on the history of the danse macabre on the translations of John Lydgate of verses on the walls of the cloister of St. Paul's Cathedral in

London, written in 1426.

Can you discuss the process in creating this volume on how you fashioned death in this way? Death as a character who judges the people who he joins to the danse. The choice of a dialogue was very intriguing and having the dead respond to Death to defend their lives especially so. Is this a modern progression of the Lydgate translations? You also updated the vocations and occupations from the Lydgate work to include the computer programmer and taxi driver for instance. Was the choice of occupations random or did this follow a design?

A: The dancing, teasing, satirical Death is part and parcel with my inspiration for the piece – the fourteenth century *danse macabre* originally inscribed upon the wall of the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris. But the concept goes back further; it is detectable in *Le Troi Mort et le Troi Vif* (Three Dead and Three Living), a poem by

Baudouin de Condé from the thirteenth century. The key idea is that every corpse was once a living person, and thus in a perfect position to comment on the foibles of the young and foolish in view of the inevitable. It's one of those concepts that isn't properly Christian nor entirely pagan: a literary device rooted in the folklore of revenants. My aim was very much to provide a modern progression of the Lydgate translations.

I go into this a great deal deeper in the essay "The Danse Macabre", included in the collection.

Perhaps the crucial difference is that the original uses feudal rank (both temporal and ecclesiastic) as an ordering device. Contemporary western society doesn't have the same kind of system, so what I came up with was a rough progression of categories, commencing with Movers and Shakers, and running on down to the

Demimonde. My thoughts were about the respect that is popularly granted to different professions and positions, and whether this respect is really deserved.

Q: The gender of the various occupations (except perhaps for The Musician whom you name David) in these dialogues is left to the reader. Some strike me as male and some as female. Did you have a gender in mind for any of these characters?

A: Some more than others: I mean, there *are* male burlesque dancers and female drug dealers, but I'd be lying if I claimed not to have a bias. Still, however *you* see a character is undoubtedly the right way.

Q: I read in bios of you online that your partner is named David. Is *The Musician* a little gig at him or just coincidence?

A: In *The Land of Bad Dreams*, the poem “Vespers” is dedicated to “David”. This is my partner. As it happens, “The Musician” episode of *The Macabre Modern* was composed shortly after the death of a singer whom I greatly admired. If not for your question, Mr Cowen, this coincidence would doubtless have confused future generations.

Q: For each of the characters — by occupation or age — you seem to develop very distinctive personas for each. How did you map this out? Did you create a picture in your mind of each character to determine the response the character would have to Death’s commentary? I would almost think you needed to create a flow chart of some sort as if you were plotting out a novel.

A: There was no flow-chart, I can tell you that! What there was, was a desire to illuminate as

many potential responses and approaches to the *idea* of dying as possible. This helped me zero in on the characters. For example, the materialist who believed only in what he owned is content he squeezed the greatest possible value out of life, the idealist who wanted to improve life for all is filled with doubt and regret. As you mentioned above, it can become quite cruel.

Q: Mid-volume in *The Macabre Modern* there is a shift from that deathly dialogue to various subjects — Concepts, which includes a wonderful non-fiction essay on the history of the danse macabre, Little Deaths, and a short piece of fiction called The Loquacious Cadaver. The themes here change. In Libitina's Garden you go "modern" with poems focusing on Ancient Rome. Some of these verses continue the strong use of meter and form while others such as Buried in Jade diverge from this track. For example in The Grove, a section of the poem Libitina's Garden, you used meter and rhyme

very effectively

No temple stands within the walls of Rome
to let her who is Dis Pater's palatine.
The cypress branch outside the shuttered
home
denotes a grove beyond the Esquiline
where ash sequesters souvenirs of dread—
the greater bones may well resist the
flame—
and all the earth is rancid with such dead
as left the future neither wealth nor name.

In The Necromancer's Question you continue
the use of lyricism so well but not a rhyme
scheme. As an example

But now, my slave, you must recall my touch.
The coldness of your skin gives me no pause.
As my hands play your nerves awake, my
breath

shall resurrect your lungs, my kiss your heart.
Of greater value than black pearls in wine,
this kiss, and of more potency. And now,
As muscles twitch and tongue begins to stir,
I conjure you to speak, and not to lie.

Would you still consider this body of work within the “weird poetry” mold? Or do you think it different. You certainly keep the stylistic linguistics and a certain reverence for the heavier lyricism of more classic poetry. Several poems in this section had the “hint” of rhyme which would appear in various stanzas. Always keeping a meter and strong voice. What draws you to move from one style to the other? Is it the topic, a whim or some other motivation.

A: Given the definition I came up with at the start of this interview, I would consider it even weirder! Nothing is quite so weird as history: I give you lost myths, the voice of mummies,

incantations and twisted morality plays—arranged, you will note, in roughly chronological order. I place my Chambersian poem “Tattered Livery” and the humorous “Don't Open The Box!” at the end, as being properly timeless.

And I think I've already answered your question about why I sometimes choose not to rhyme. But the fact is, just as some ideas are poems and not short stories or novels, some poems are monologues, or revisionist ballads, or sonnets... sometimes, they simply have to run free.

Q: Having heard you read your poems at Stokercon it strikes me that your work could hold up well in a Slam competition. Have you experimented with Slam poetry? Or, participated in it? Could you see a place for slam poetry in the horror/fantasy genres?

A: Alas, I have not! There isn't much of a slam

poetry scene in Sydney; at least, that I have encountered, and thus I do not feel I can really make such a call.

Q: I ask this of most of the poets I interview. Some poets make a point to write every day for a period of time regardless of whether anything inspires them. Others wait for an idea to strike them and then write. Some seem to only write poetry as part of a themed project. Which type are you and why do you choose that practice over the other?

A: I am nearly always writing and generally have a variety of projects “on the boil”. But these are not all poetry. In fact, I find that shifting modes, from the novel-in-progress to a short story, from poetry to play, enables me to *keep* writing.

Q: Another “stock” question, but one very relevant to how and why poets write. Do you

ever write for “therapy?” That is, to simply get something off your chest or to help you filter a strong emotion or life event? If so, how long do you wait to do that normally? For myself, I do not like to write about things happening to me at the moment because my perspective may change or my emotions may taint the poem to the point it is just venting. From what I read I do not see that you insert your personal feelings you’re your work, being more of a story teller, but it certainly could just be well hidden. What do you do?

A: As a general rule, I do prefer to let my personal experience brew and then filter slowly through into my work, rather than let it shape a piece direct. There is a danger of ranting. And poetry must never be confused with ranting or vice versa.

Q: With this new collection out now what do you plan to do next with your writing?

A: I have a novel to finish. Don't we all?

But actually, I'm giving some time to a play I hope will be performed under the auspices of *Deadhouse: Tales of Sydney Morgue* in a year or so. Historic true crime, but an especially bizarre one. Our current venue is the crypt underneath Saint James's church.

Death and the Celebrity

(an extract from “The Macabre Modern”)

DEATH

A willing partner here at last!
Whose hand is smooth, whose step is fast.
Such earthly angels, once deceased,
routinely find their fame increased!

As amber, each iconic scene
preserves your carapace pristine.
Eternal glory somewhat flat
but not a whit less real for that.

THE CELEBRITY

Your words should consolation bring
and yet they have a hollow ring,
for moulded by a thousand hands
my guise but answered the demands
of press and public: all they see
is all the use they made of me.
Their compliments like razors strewn
along the path I trod so soon.

(First published in *The Macabre Modern and Other Morbidities*, P'rea Press Sydney 2019)

Dual Purpose

A lantern casts a shadow in the day,
and little things of darkness fight for room,
where iron fretwork turns the sun away,
and bull's eye panels cast a spectral bloom.
Such demons as are sloughed like ash from Hell,
and lost familiars, waiting witch's prayer.
Glimpse fledgling gargoyles, yet to grow a shell,
and spirits trapped in necromantic snare.
As men may huddle in a shaft of light,
as twilight drowns the square and meeting hall,
so many of the haunts that give them fright,
cling writhing there, until the night shall fall.
And when the glass at last begins to heat,
a wave of terror rushes up the street.

(first published in *Spectral Realms #6*, February 2017)

The Priestess

(an extract from “Lucubration”)

It seems I have walked colonnades aside
of hornéd heads with women's breasts, and
known

a man's face rise above a lion's paunch,
serpents and scarabae with human hands
and phalluses: I say, not all were stone.

Across the sands disguising all above,
devoutly, pilgrims trace an ancient path
from out the lesser shadows of the night,
down cunning stairs that lead to us below.
Echoing vaults as chill and black as death,
where barks of granite draw their cargo nigh,
and stone papyrus holds the heavens high.

Our oracle brings men with azure beards
and layered robes, redheads with pallid skin,
bronze men and black: with offerings of wood,
of iron and silver, ivory and salt,
the oil of whales and one thing more, for here
no circle holds the demon kind at bay.

The supplicants pass columns in the murk,

offering bodies to a winged embrace
and throats to kisses bringing such sweet pains
as only teeth permit and blood contains.
They come for knowledge: knowledge they shall
find
in scented smoke that frees the untrained mind,
murmured by shades and hissed by coiling
fiends,
and whispered from the lips of blessed things
that pass above them, stirring fragrant wind.
Whate'er they seek, be it the fate of kings,
the course of wars, felicity of brides,
or cure of plagues: the answer here abides.
Yet none of these shall ever find the lake
where lotus blossoms raise their scented heads
above black waters, warm and thick as blood.
None shall approach the greatest mystery,
the beating stone, the nigrescence within
the inmost shrine, where only priests may go.
Only the chosen: all these paths are mine.

(first published in *Avatars of Wizardry*, ed. Danny

Lovecraft, P'rea Press 2012)

Night Cars

When sleep wraps the house in a blanket of
wool
and dulls the rooms in an opaque mist,
when your eyes peer out of the marshes of
sleep,
merging your flesh with the fester below,
then you may hear the night cars.

Sleek, hungry as sharks,
they cruise the streets seeming
to stare with their empty seats.
Slowly, smoothly, serried they circle,
to focus on
could it be
you?

When you wake in the night for no reason,

grobe for the blanket and hide
in the pit of your mind,
in the pit of your gut,
in the festering darkness below.
Muffle your ears to the sound of the night cars.

They roar like a sea wave,
Foam hissing down the deserted street.
A gale in the tree-tops thunders
and dies to
a whisper.
Hide.

You may see their headlights in arcs on the
ceiling,
circling patterns but
hide.

Hide.
Do not succumb.
For go to see the night cars
and they will hunt you.
They will find you.

And when morning comes all there will be
are rags of skin and scattered clumps of
hair
at the
side of the
road.

(First published in *Abaddon #2*, 1999)

Biography:

Based in Sydney, Kyla has produced short fiction, articles and poetry, including Aurealis and Australian Shadows Award winners and Stoker, Ditmar and Rhysling nominees. A role-playing gamer from way back, her work on properties including *Demon: the Fallen* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* saw her appear as a guest at the inaugural Gencon Australia, and she programmed the horror stream for the 2010 Worldcon (Aussiecon 4). An actor, specialising in

immersive theatre and the Grand Guignol, and occasional playwright, her short film, Bad Reception screened at the Third International Vampire Film Festival. Otherwise, she has travelled widely and rhymed adventurously. Her interests include history, occultism and scaring innocent bystanders.