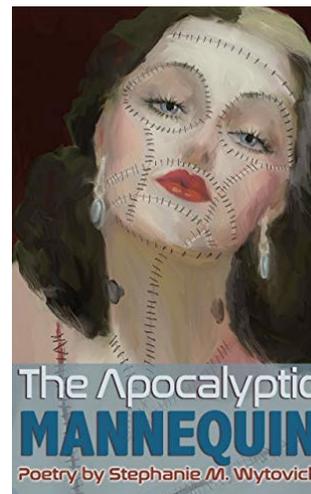
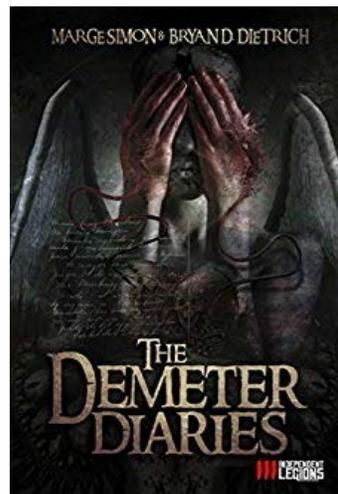
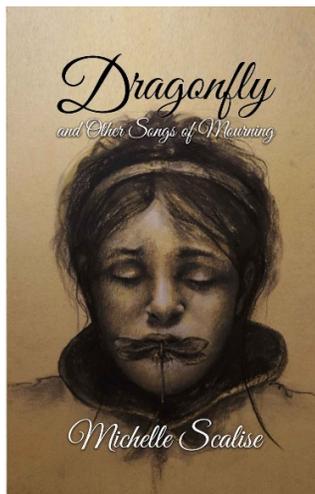
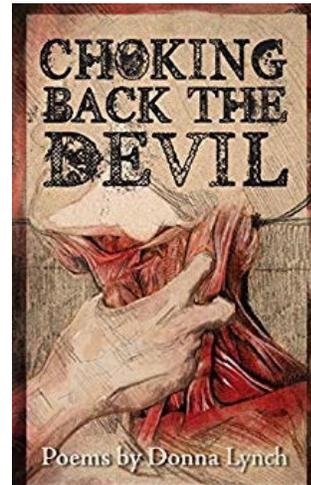
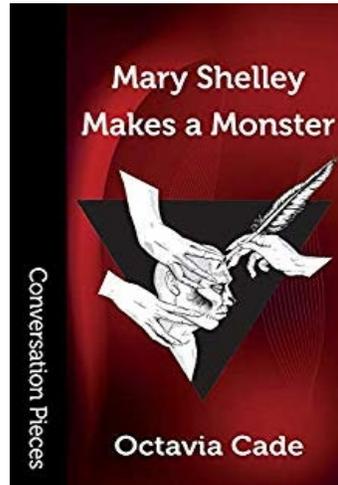
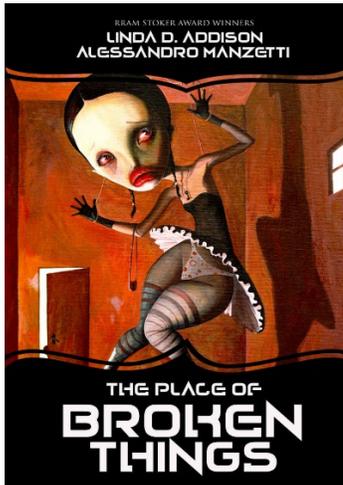


2020 Bram Stoker Nominees for Superior Achievement Poetry

*By David E. Cowen
Bram Stoker Nominee for Bleeding Saffron (Weasel Press 2018)*



The Finalists for the 2019 Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Poetry have been announced. This year six volumes made the final list. They are (listed alphabetically):

Addison, Linda D. and Manzetti, Alessandro – *The Place of Broken Things* (Crystal Lake Publishing)

Cade, Octavia – *Mary Shelley Makes a Monster* (Aqueduct Press)

Lynch, Donna – *Choking Back the Devil* (Raw Dog Screaming Press)

Scalise, Michelle – *Dragonfly and Other Songs of Mourning* (LVP Publications)

Simon, Marge and Dietrich, Bryan D. – *The Demeter Diaries* (Independent Legions Publishing)

Wytovich, Stephanie M. – *The Apocalyptic Mannequin* (Raw Dog Screaming Press)

Each of the authors was gracious enough to share their favorite pieces from their books:

***The Place of Broken Things* by Linda D. Addison and Alessandro Manzetti (Crystal Lake Publishing)**

The Dead Dancer

by Linda D. Addison & Alessandro Manzetti

At first, when she started dancing,
at the same time each day,
(wearing a grotesque black and white suit)
the walls of the purple room seem
to shine, opening warm crevices, new windows
without an outside or a landscape out there,
as if the bricks are guided by the second
movement
of Tchaikovsky' Pathétique, a transparent
absinthe,
maybe waiting for the golden eggs of love
to bloom inside their old beams;
a false hope repeating infinitely.
—can loneliness have a soundtrack?—

But then, drums explode suddenly,
at the same time each day,
(and you can hear the horns mourning)
making the music change, blowing storm,
letting the dancer become aware,
with eyes as big as underworld's coins,
of the pallor of her own skin and

the wet cold of that abandoned house,
the vanishing scene of something bad,
the dance floor of eternal return;
a false face, a flesh mask mirroring the past.
—can we die again and again, so many
times?—

Her back bent, dreams become strings
played by Tchaikovsky' Pathétique, hope &
tears promised by Movement Three, dancing for
you more than once, (can we die more than
once?) and waltz endless on legs stretched
into the earth, mouth extending into horn
sections, moving without making a sound.
Did you see it, when the walls bled as an
invisible conductor spun light, full of shadow?
—can denial become an endless meal?—

Allegro molto vivace, roaring softer,
softer in the mind, reaching the unlocked door,
the too small window, until toes melt, legs
freeze in place, gaze held in place, golden
threads seducing all ghosts, reminding us

what grace can end, what grace can begin,
will never be enough to extinguish the
small flame, the wheel going no where.
—can the moth escape the glass bell?—

Facing Olympia

by Alessandro Manzetti

Some say you're held
in solitary confinement, for years,
on a Museum's white wall,
—Naked, right beside the Seine—
but I first saw you, voiceless odalisque,
near the gardens of the outskirts
of my imaginary town at midnight.
You looked like the goddess of waste
—A light bulb in the dark—
with your red leather suit
shining, a red reflecting surface
full of captured things;
eyes, tongues, nearly killed stars, moths.
—all the pieces of frustrated lives—

Others say you're only a painting
and know your real name;
—Venus, Olympia, Maja—
bullshit, you're flesh and blood like me,
like all the miserables entangled here
in the same streets, alleys,
in the same midnight,
always looking over their shoulder
—The pimp knows well how to use a knife—
always looking at you, at the same time,
from the car windows.
—She can turn a rat into a king—

Still others say you're a hooker,
naughty and too white skinned,
—Fifty bucks? Are you real?—
or an Orient ghost who has lost its way,
who feeds on the juice of men to survive.
—A beautiful kind of pain and abyss —
But it doesn't matter, I'll be dead
without finding you, each midnight,
here, in the midland of life
—Squeezed, lonely oranges —

where nothing else matters than
finding something familiar, beautiful
during the Alzheimer' tides.

Failed Love Lessons

by Linda D. Addison

This is not my breath, it is yours, the false start,
mis-aligned emotions sliding past the cut in
your chest. That is not my opening revealing
all secrets, it is yours, it used to be our hearts
beating together.

This is not my hand, it is yours that caressed
my
face, breath quickening as the cut at your
wrist released it, lies written in sleepy
moments seeping out, crimson script,
patterns of mis-used affection.

These are not my eyes, they are yours, can you
finally see me, the real me, now that I have

freed them from your confusing need to control.

I suspect the tears of blood on your cheeks contain some truth.

It is not my skin, it is yours peeled away to allow the history of pain to write itself in the veins underneath, a map from the past to unseen future.

There, there now, admitting wrong is no sin, hiding it is...

These are not my muffled cries, they are yours, denying, pleading for redemption I can not give, only seek out the truth of your abuse, interpreted through the echoes of devotional song, here in distant woods where you first seduced me.

This is my recovery, my need to understand how false love came to be, so I will know better

next time, so I can learn...

Mary Shelley Makes a Monster by Octavia
Cade (Aqueduct Press)

**Mary Shelley: MARY SHELLEY MAKES A
MONSTER**

1

The monster has no heart.

Mary has two.

There is the one she keeps in her bureau –
wrapped up in silk and parchment,
burnt about the edges and stinking of salt.

It is the heart of the man who was her lover

and it is less damaged than the heart inside her
chest.

That is a mangled and un-pretty thing,
but she takes it out of her chest
sits it beside the other:

two hearts on a writing desk.

The vibrations send the papers flying.

The hearts are both shrivelled and blackening
but hers

is about to bite and his just slumps there,
as though all its work was done in drowning.

There is no question which is the stronger.

Mary takes her own strong heart and puts it
back

into the cavity behind her ribs.

The monster has to be loved, and with that
leaking scrap

sitting in a silver box inside the monster's chest
she will be able to love it.

(If she gave it her own heart it would rip her to
pieces.)

(If she took his heart for her own,
grief would catch at her like undertow,

yank her down into deep water.)

2

The monster has no foresight.

Mary doesn't have much either
but the monster is one of her creations
and she would like to do better for it than
herself.

She smashes a glass and collects the fragments,
picks shards out of her palms
until they're wet with blood and then she shapes
the little pieces,
paints them with red and silver on one side only
and she has her mirrors.

These she pastes to the monster's fingers for
nails

so that it can see its face

(when it has a face)

in everything as it creates.

But the monster is a baby still and sucks its fists

buries its thumbs in the blank crevasse of mouth
and all the nails come off.

Mary breaks more glasses, paints more mirrors
and this time before she pastes them
she doesn't round off the edges.

When the monster sucks its thumbs its blood
runs black as engine oil.
It learns not to suck anymore.

Mary's face is reflected ten times, and harshly.

3

The monster has no history.

Mary papers the inside of its skull with dreams
of her mother,
with vindications of a life that she herself cut
short.

She impregnates it with rights
and the monster comes to believe that it has
them.

Of course you do, says Mary –
but when it comes time to take the monster out
(to display it)
she pretends it has been made by somebody
else,
lets it stumble about blindly
searching for the mother that abandoned it
until everyone has gone home and she is left
with
the reminders of her imperfections.

You are just a copy, she says, mocking.
Poor copy.

*Choking Back the Devil by Donna Lynch (Raw
Dog Screaming Press)*

Choking Back the Devil

I am choking back the devil
with every kiss and every cry

I will have to swallow harder
until my mouth is dry

He made his home inside me
I no longer wonder why
He slipped in slowly, deeply
Hollowed me completely
With no regret or mercy
No deception nor disguise

When I'm pushing he is pulling
When I'm silent he is speaking
When I'm screaming
he is clawing at my throat

He guides my hands
and moves my tongue
Until the thirsty work is done
And the cities are on fire
and the exits are all locked

You cannot know
You cannot know

I cry
What it is to be consumed
By something so inviting
That will bite until you're gone

So I am choking back the devil
And it tastes of blood and brine
I will have to swallow harder
Until my mouth is dry.

The Cult of Immolaine

Amid the secret, waking nightmares she
endured
we found each other
A deep cold hell that pooled around her
Mine was more a storm inside me
Our ugly humor keeping us from drowning
She was so scared of drowning

We talked of mutilation
Psycho killers and their demons
And we laughed to show them we were unafraid

We lit candles on alters
Praying to a saint we had created
We carried hammers just in case she didn't come
But she must come

She will set the shore ablaze
To dry us to our bones and keep us warm
Saint Immolaine would never let us drown
Until the night she did

The demons swam around us in the pool
Coming in like sharks
every time she bled
Gasping for her breath she cried for Immolaine
We did not pray enough
She cried to me
We did not believe enough
She cried to god

But I knew how to swim
A faster minnow than my sister
I knew to drop the hammer
so that I might float

I knew not to thrash and flail
revealing all my injuries
I did not bleed and lead them to me
We pulled her from the pool
From the mouths of apex predators
Immolaine and I
And our blessed saint told her what to do
So she'd never have to drown again
So she'd never be devoured underwater
And with that sacred knowledge
She stood tall upon the shores of hell
And set her pretty self on fire.

You Are Not You

You are not you
I said
As I gazed in the mirror, scissors in hand, and
stripped down
Even though I wasn't wearing any clothes.

*Dragonfly and Other Songs of Mourning by
Michelle Scalise (LVP Publications)*

THE HALL

By Michelle Scalise

Doctors pat my hand,
Speak slowly
As if comforting a child
And I hate them for it.

They call her away from my bed
Into the dark
Into the hall
Time never moves as I wait.

She returns with eyes red as raspberries
Black eyeliner haphazardly
Wiped away.
She talks too quickly about nothing,
But I see the cracks.
Her lips frozen blue from the snow.
She could never lie worth a damn.

What happens to her out there?
I look to see if they've broken her fingers
But my vision is blurry from the drugs
And her hands shake so.

The next time they come for her
I scream in my head, don't go!
But she's a rag doll
Pulled along the floor by strangers.

I call her name.
My lips don't move.
She crawls on hands and knees
To the priests that never smile
Waiting for her in the hall.

DRAGONFLY

By Michelle Scalise

You remain
the shadow of a dragonfly
fluttering in dusty curtains.

Two years, my voice grows hoarse
calling you back from a void.
Can you hear me anymore?
Or have my cries become a metronome
quietly ticking away the moments
of a mad woman.

Cast adrift with pain and ashes,
everyone shrieking, “Let him go”
until the boat tossed
I lost my grip
and you were swallowed by the sea.
A black box sinking into nowhere.

There is a memory,
the silence when you stopped breathing
keeps me down and keeps me screaming.
I clench my fists until I bleed.

Burned my tarot cards the day you died
but flames burning a black tower
had warned me long ago
of the winter winds to come.

Plug my ears to no avail
their voices go on and on,
“At least he’s not in pain”.

OCTOBER

By Michelle Scalise

Walking in sunlight until the sky soured.
Thunder crackled, frightening the dogs.
Lightning struck a blinding blow
Fire writhed like a snake to your mind.
Our days of mercy were gone.

Trees turned black,
Three branches died in seconds.
Rain drenched our clothes
And I knew you couldn’t see.

I ran and fell.
Scratched my knees
But like childhood
No one was there to comfort me.

Mystified by the future
That ran like a horror film
In murky puddles,
I watched the world drain of color.
Glanced behind me
And you were gone.

***The Demeter Diaries Simon*, by Marge Simon
and Bryan D. Dietrich
(Independent Legions Publishing)**

MINA

Months ago, I bade Jonathan goodbye. As he held me close one last time, I felt a sudden pang of great concern for him. Why should that be? Will something awful happen to him, something that would put his life in danger? I prayed not so. Yet watching as his ship took sail, I felt that horrid weight of guilt and worry lift. Since then, I've sensed your presence as strongly as before. Can this be true, that you are closer now, my

love? I feel your cool lips on my neck, on places Jonathan has never been allowed.

Though it's early winter, I'm still drawn to wander the garden. I fancy I'm warmed by the smell of you, so different from any other. It is a strange musk, a perfume that suits you well.

Tonight there was a chill wind from the north. Moonlight laid a patterned spread of ghastly indefinable's across the garden. Even the stone nymph on the fountain—my favorite one—even that innocent thing seemed altered. Its chubby marble face was in partial shadow, but the eyes seemed to follow me along the path. Then I noticed something in the icy water. To my horror, it was a dying sparrow, doubtless shot by some mischievous young boy. Its blood had turned the surface to swirls of garnet. If only I could have saved it, blown life back into the poor creature! I reported this to Mr. William and then took to my chambers.

Back in my room, I feel I should pray for Jonathan, even if it is already too late. The doctor's opiate is still on the nightstand. I shall take one with a sip of tea and swallow, for I need to block you from my mind this once, my love. Just this once.

VLAD

I

One tormented soul wails west of Galilee,
west of Gibraltar, screaming into the sea,
long past the Black, past Cyrene, Tripoli,
as the wind and I blow like blind banshee
and we crack open clouds, here to Innisfree,
and we murder the men where they stand on the
lee
and we freeze them to marble, break them like
scree,

and the wind and I howl over each crystaled
bone,
over mouths frozen open like glass xylophones,

and the bodies as bass notes contribute deep
tones
to the symphony growing from every groan
of the ship as it sails, crewless, lifeless, alone,
and I wander among the dead men like a Throne
cast down from the walls of a heaven of stone.

II

Cast down from the walls of my heaven like
stone,
I trouble the waters, demand a cyclone.

The wind racks and cracks, making corpse
cracker jacks
as the fog wraps its lacks in a brackish black
flax

and the water surrenders to kraken-like temper
while timber remembers each horrid December

and breaks at the ribs, both foredeck and aft
as if I were God, god of love, god of craft,

but this craft does not matter, neither should I,
for I have become wholly wind, wholly eye,
and I move across ocean and island and coast
and I drown even more and I drink each a toast
from the salt and the blood and the foam and the
spew,
from all that is left of this crystalline crew.

III

From all that is left, this crystal, my crew,
I draw forth the power of all that comes due
when silence turns violence. Nail, screw.

In the center of thunder and lightning and rain,
I open each wound, I let my heart drain
out into the maelstrom, the legerdemain
of what I had thought I was headed toward,

the woman who stains me like blood stains a
sword,
and I watch as the hurricane spreads what I
spored

and my blood reaches out, from Cádiz to Chios,
touching every bay of the Barbary Coast,
a dark incarnation, a whore's holy ghost.

I miss you my Mina. I am my own hell.
I come to you hungry. I ride the sea swell.

MINA

I stayed in my room the rest of the day into the
night. It seemed strange that no one came
knocking on my door, not even the maid. Mr.
Westenra was so angry, I felt sure he wasn't
finished upbraiding me. The skies grew dark,
and darker still. A great wind rose up, rattling
the panes and shutters in a most alarming way. I
fancied I could hear the moaning of lost souls,
but there was no sign of a blizzard when I drew

the drapes. It was then I sensed your presence, my One—even stronger than before. And you are very near, at last!

VLAD

I have stood beside you for nights now, just this side of the pane. My indiscreet anger brought priests to protect you and your friend. Priests, doctors, experts. Texas toadies. Lords of nothing. Even my old nemesis, Abraham. They tend to Lucy. They dote on your future. They know nothing of sickness, nothing about the future. The days that lie before us stretch out in infinite sheets, billow like sails, stain like bridal bed linen. They fold. They grow old and yellow. You must use them before they tatter. Nothing sadder than a bed made for no one. Nothing darker than the perfect corner left unturned. I want so badly, Mina, to join you now, to pass this glass and guide you to the mountain

upon which desire's deity has bid me
slay you, lead you to the stone cairn
where both of us shall be altered, born
again. But the thorns of this life, the men
like Abraham who surround you, keep
me at bay. They make plans. They seek
my secret soil. Already they make it hard
to keep our sacred sickness from spreading.
Already, these men deny the sacrifice
that their gods, that we, demand.

The Apocalyptic Mannequin by Stephanie M. Wytovich
(Raw Dog Screaming Press)

Death Bed

My death bed is loose dirt and broken glass,
no one thought to give me better, just a symphony
of bruised organs and gravel in my throat, an ensemble
of broken nails and loose teeth, my tongue swallowed,
a sandpaper bulge cocooned in my throat.

There are twigs intertwined in my hair, dancing
among the maggots that form a wiggling crown,
their smooth bodies slipping along wet, matted hair,
the wind a sorry conditioner for split ends painted

with coagulated blood and sweat.

I didn't think to bring a blanket when I died, forgot
to fashion a pillow for my skull, my chapped skin
now burnt red, frostbit from the cold, the bloat
my only protection from the snapping mouths,
all those hungry teeth, gnawing through the forest,
searching for fresh death like a slaughterhouse whore.

But I am spoken for, my body a leaking faucet,
a slow coffee drip, each drop a drink for the earth,
corpse the main meal on the menu: please eat me
slowly, savor the rotted skin, lick out the week-old
marrow. I want to be touched one final time, devoured
like the goddess I used to be.

Identification

I identify as haunted,
as a broken violin,
a forest wrapped in fog.

If you look between my legs,
you will find an empty library,
each shelf a collection of ghostings,
blank signage for a dimly light hallway,
a spider web, an unfinished opera.

I am neither a baptism dress
nor a wedding ring, a wake photograph
nor a satin-lined bed. If you call,
I will not answer, if you run,
I promise to hide.

But inside my chest beats a jewelry box
with no sound, walks an orphan forever
flipping pages of an unwritten book.

If you pick up the rose on the table,
or smell the salts stuffed into my mouth,
you'll find my future in my palms, my past
written in burn marks on my back.

Just wrap your wounds carefully,
for I am a host of century-lost diseases,
an epidemic, a long-forgotten plague, and if you
hold a seashell up to your ear,
it will whisper the endings to every poem,
my signature a cockroach, the poison
you left out for the rats.

Still Life with Scars

There are knife wounds across my chest, the whisper
of a bullet on my arm. If you can get past the cracked
bones, the way my teeth hang at an angle, you'll see

I am a still-life trauma dressed in scar tissue, a forest of bound fractures, a storm of smoke-damaged lungs coughing on curfews, the echoes of active shooters still ringing in my ears.

But if you say my name, I'll bleed apologies like a butcher's block, each plea a watercolor portrait dressed in tendons and tears, every prayer a gaslit hiccup washed down with the stale communion wine of empty churches; I still trip on their promises, on all those corpses with eyes that look like his.

You see, it's not enough that I survived, that my life is a reel of stained-glass memories, of sandstorm bombings, the taste of metal in the air, but rather it's how the tourniquets on my wrists are still weeping, how the thorns in my scalp dig deeper, my face dressed with pain, this descent, this crucifixion, there's no such thing as death if there's no one left to watch you die.