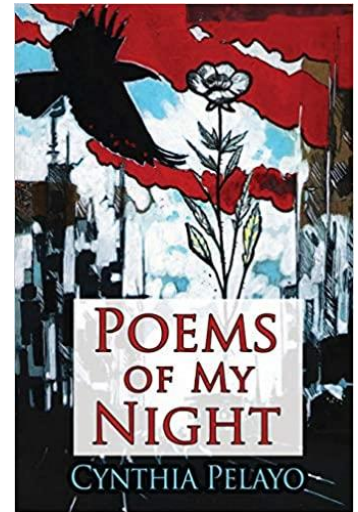
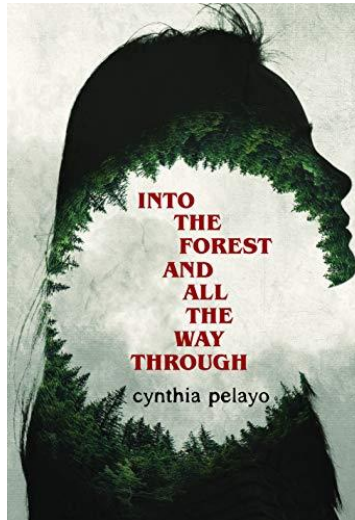


The Haunting of the Disappeared: An Interview with Cynthia Pelayo

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

Cynthia (Cina) Pelayo, a native of Chicago, is the author of *Loteria*, *Santa Muerte*, *The Missing*, *Poems of My Night*, *Children of Chicago* (upcoming in 2021) and her most recent collection of poems *Into the Forest and All the Way Through*.



She is an International Latino Book Award winning author and an Elgin Award nominee. She is a researcher, writer, publisher, and the editor of Burial Day Books. She earned her BA from Columbia College Chicago, a Master of Science from Roosevelt University and a Master of Fine Arts in Writing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a Business Psychology PhD candidate at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology. She has earned accolades with all of her writings and I am very

pleased she agreed to answer some questions about her works and the craft of writing poetry.

Q: You begin the Introduction to Into the Forest and All the Way Through (Burial Day Books 2020) with this jolting declaration, “I have spent my nights with missing and murdered women, over one hundred of them.” I certainly understand the crisis facing our country involving women who are taken from the world as if somehow just cancelled from existence. This is the real cancel culture. In one seemingly horrific moment they simply cease to exist and are added to an ever expanding statistic. Instead of a single poem devoted to this subject you take the reader through an exhausting and traumatizing path of 100 individuals that were not just numbers added to a graphic. Taking on such a huge project would be daunting for many authors. Tell us about the process you went through to not only choose this topic but the research required to accomplish this task. What do you hope to leave with someone reading this book?

A: This was certainly a time commitment, but I figured someone has to care, and if I am the only one who researches these cases, writes about them and thinks about them then that is certainly important. I want them to know that I care, that I think about them, very, very often, and that I have sat in my room at night and cried for them,

thought of them, their life and, in a way, was with them during that terrible moment that ended their life, because I really wanted to think about those last few moments. It's hard to read and think about, but I wonder – what were they thinking of? Were they calling out to their mother? What were they looking at? I want to think that even if they had the sky above them or the forest around them, that something in nature held them and told them that they were not alone.

It's probably too spiritual for some people to think, and while I'm not a practicing Catholic and follow more of an eclectic spiritual background, I like to think that there is something greater than ourselves, and that after we cease to exist here that there remains love and peace. I know that does not help their families, but I want to believe that these women are loved and are at peace, because I wish that for them so much. So that is a very long way to say that yes, this was an emotionally taxing process, and I recognize that I took this on voluntarily.

The process itself was quite daunting as well. I'm what some call "true crime obsessed." I've written about our cultural obsession with true crime, and the commercialization of suffering and death. Poe said there is nothing more poetic than the "death of a beautiful woman" and marketers have learned that the death of a beautiful woman sells, and that is awful to say and think about, but

it's true. We have true crime podcasts, true crime conventions, true crime cruises, true crime television, and true crime books.

I have not really seen true crime poetry, and so I wanted to do something that took consumers out of that safe space, and by safe space. I mean things like Jack the Ripper Walking Tours. That's a safe space, because we are so detached from those vicious murders, that walking along that path almost takes on this fun house effect, but would someone feel the same way say for reliving the last moments of a woman who was brutally murdered a week ago? Is it fun to visit the house of a mother and her daughter who were raped and killed and whose killer was never caught? This is hard to say and write, but it's true. We gawk at murder. So, with my research I wanted to really dive into the horrific details of the case, and present them in a very sobering light – that these women were killed and were taken and we do not know what happened to them, but someone else does.

In terms of the actual research, I'm a former journalist and I am a vice president by day for a research firm, so I am a research nerd. I used several sources, local news sources, FBI databases, national missing persons databases, and amateur sleuth chat rooms and forums that were able to point me to additional sources. It's heartbreaking, because for some of these women there is just a date and time in

which they went missing. Just a few sentences to mark their life. Yet, for others , there are these detailed reports and case findings that glaringly point to a clear suspect who was never arrested. Both instances are frustrating, and we really should not be fine with any of these really. We as a civilized society should not be fine with women going missing or being murdered.

Ultimately, what I hope to accomplish, is I want you to read their names. I want you to know that they were little girls once, these beautiful young women, and these fantastic adult women who should be with us today, but are not, because another human being deemed that they could use and discard these women, and I want you, dear reader to be utterly terrified. Because if this could happen to them, it could happen to anyone, because their killers are still out there.

Q: With this volume you do not just tell us about each of the women who were murdered but provide a distinct voice to each poem. I Googled several of the names of the victims to get a sense of the reality of this work. This book is not meant to be entertainment, as much written in the horror field. The faces of these women are haunting when I saw their photographs and then read your words. Journalists often claim to be able to write about such subjects by being “neutral” and uninvolved in the subject

matter of their reporting. Poets may be observers but they are not just tellers of news or stories. Poets craft words into emotions. In writing so extensively on this serial tragedy did you ever feel overwhelmed by not just the task but the subject matter? Did the sadness of these losses ever make you wonder if you could finish this project or were you determined to present these lost lives in your volume?

A: There were a few times when I told myself I could not do this, that I had to abandon this project, but then I thought if I did that then I was as cold, in a way, as those who had forgotten them or botched or abandoned their cases. Once I started it was difficult to stop because I really felt as though there was an expectation that I complete. I didn't owe this to anyone, or was working against any timeline other than the one I set for myself. It was a personal passion project that I felt so important be written and released that I felt like my commitment was to finish.

What was difficult is that I had to stop at some point and some poems did not make it into the final collection, and I still struggle with that, that I feel like I left some forgotten. So yes, there was a lot of sadness because I wanted to write about so many, but the further along I went the more their stories began to emotionally and physically impact me. I don't sleep much as it is, but sleeping became difficult, eating, and just rest, but my spouse was very supportive

throughout and would direct me to care for myself when he saw I was getting especially invested in a case.

For some cases, I would obsess for hours or days and could not move on, because that was all I would think or talk about, but he was able to gently nudge me to move on to the next poem.

Q: With so many diverse lives and stories, how did you choose the poetic voice for each poem? Some of the poems are essentially prose poems and some more traditional free verse. For example, In Iowa State Coed, about Sheila Jean Collins, you describe the continuing horror of the silence of these crimes

*Will you ever talk? Will
Anyone ever talk? Can anyone ever
Tell us what happened, or are those
Lips still frozen tight by deviancy?
Or, are they dead too? It's been fifty
Years now...*

In Sing Us a Lullaby, about the disappearance of Jennifer Dawn Lancaster (18 years old) and her two daughters, one year old and one month old, you wrote

*One month old, and a one-year-old
Did your mother sing you a lullaby?*

*Mother clothed you, dressed you, and
Took you away in the night to visit with
A friend. No one has seen mother. No one
Has seen you, nor you, and it's been more
Years than mother's age when you all left
Time does that, it continues its slow
Progression, but you cannot do that, you
Are frozen in baby pictures, and are you
With your mother?*

The questions posed haunt as much as the stories of these women. Was there a method to selecting so many diverse voices or did you let the voice come through with the story?

A: I described my process elsewhere with this collection as a reverse exorcism. In an exorcism you're expelling the bad, and the negative. In my process of writing these poems, and I don't really recommend this because it's not good for one's mental health - I would consume as much as I could about a single case, and that is how I focused my attention – one case at a time. I would focus on that one case for hours or days, reading news reports, case files, finding and reviewing crime scene photos, or even evidence photos of the last thing they were wearing at that time. Then, and only then could I feel as though I knew enough about them and their case that I could approach the voice correctly.

For Sheila, her case makes me just so angry, they all do, but Sheila, here's a beautiful girl from near my hometown of Chicago who was innocently looking for a ride home for the holidays, and some monster lured her with an offer of a ride, violated her out in a rural area and left her there dead. Then, and I can go on about this forever, her case was used to propel the political careers of some who essentially blamed the victim. It's beyond unjust, to die in such a way, and then to have your reputation tainted.

Sheila deserved a life, and she died so long ago that I wonder who thinks about her today. So, in her case I was very angry when I wrote that poem for her double violation.

For Jennifer and her beautiful daughters, they were all babies, Jennifer 18, Sidney a year old and Monique a month old. To tell me no one knows anything about what happened to these three women is a blatant lie. Someone, and I'd argue more than one person, knows what happened to them. In their case, I thought about how they have been missing longer than they were alive. That's incredible to think. They are frozen forever in these pictures and everything was taken from them, for what? Why? So, those questions all came flooding in.

So in some cases I wrote from a position of anger, or heartbreak, from the victim or even from the detective's

perspective. I allowed the research to guide me with the voice and the position and form I would take.

Q: Did you connect with the families of any of these victims during this project? Were any willing to share their stories with you? Have any approached you since the publication?

A: My spouse asked me if I would do that, and for the briefest of instances I put myself in their mother's position and I quickly said, "I could never do that." We all mourn so differently, and even with a missing person, I imagine you are mourning, even though you cannot prove nor disprove that they are dead, you are still mourning that they are not here. Birthdays and holidays have passed and they have missed life milestones, that is something to mourn.

I also did not want to reach out, because I did not want to make this project feel exploitative, like I honestly feel a lot of other true crime projects and media can be. I want this project to be perceived as an art/literary project with a social message – that these women are of value, should be here and that someone knows something and that we should not be fine as a society that these women have gone missing and have been murdered.

None of their families have approached me, but if they do, whether out of anger for writing about their loved one, or wanting to talk to me about research, I am here to listen and share what I wrote and the research I found.

Q: The volume has both a “true crime” horror aspect as well as a more mainstream. Do you consider yourself falling into any particular genre — horror or dark fantasy for example — or does your work straddle several?

A: That is a question I have struggled with sometime, about where I fit in the writing world. This project is a true crime project, undoubtedly. It is a poetry collection. It does have a horror element, like Jack Ketchum’s *The Girl Next Door*, based on the true crime case of Sylvia Likens who was tortured to death in Indianapolis by neighborhood children and the woman her parents put in her care. I think some people think that the “horror” genre should only incorporate things that are truly fictional, monsters, creatures, ghosts...but the real monsters are us. The real and true horrors that happen every day is the violence that man inflicts on his fellow man. That’s horror. Ketchum recognized that and many other horror writers and consumers of horror recognize that as well. So, yes, this collection is a true crime – horror – poetry collection.

Now, what type of writer am I? I'm a writer of poetry and fiction that writes about sorrow and despair, and sorrow and despair are very dark and tragic things. I straddle genres of horror – mystery – thriller, I suppose, but I like the flexibility and simplicity of calling myself a writer.

Q: Into the Forest covers 100 women. Obviously, this is a tiny percentage of those actually murdered and disappeared. How were you able to choose between so many potential stories, and then obtain the information needed to present each separate voice?

A: I touched on this a bit earlier, but I ran into a major issue earlier on with how was I going to curate, or focus, this collection. Was I only going to write about teenage women, children, older women, women in cities. I wanted to create a representation, and offer the message as well, of writing about at least one woman from each state in America. I thought that would be impactful. That improved my focus. I also wanted to then write about a range of women, various ages, socio economic backgrounds, rural, city, and a wide representation of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The collection does skew younger, mostly because so many of those cases were so compelling.

I also had a master Excel document where I kept track of names, dates, locations, and research. This helped me keep focus on the balance and range I was aiming for.

I wanted to show that this is not happening to one specific set of women, that this is happening to a range of women, wealthy, poor, educated, young, old, infant, retired and so on.

The information was obtained using news stories, FBI.gov, NamUS – clearinghouse for missing, unidentified and unclaimed persons and more.

Q: The reference to “forest” in the title of that collection reminds me of the fairy tales of Little Red Riding Hood accosted by the wolf on her way through the forest. Probably not what you meant, but is there a mythological or folk tale allusion in the title? Or does it have another meaning?

A: I was playing with title name for what seemed forever. At first it was going to be *These Crimes Are True*, but that just didn't communicate what I was looking to communicate. Then this phrase came to me when I was hiking one day with my family through a local forest, *Into the Forest and All the Way Through*. Yes, it also has a fairy tale message behind it, especially since I was wrapping up my horror – thriller novel *Children of Chicago* that is heavily influenced by the Grimms Fairy tales.

I did so much research on Grimms and read academic articles on fairy tales, that I was thinking about the representation of forests, that they are places where so many fairy tales take place, mostly because way back (and maybe to an extent today) forests posed real dangers, of creeping and lurking animals and other dangers – rivers, and so on. So the message in my title poem, “Remember Me,” where the title comes from is almost me begging women to be safe, be cautious of your surroundings, if you see something strange, have a strange feeling get out of that place, get out of that symbolic forest and please get home safely.

Many of us women have to go “Into the Forest” so to speak, when we park our cars too far away, visit the grocery store late at night, walk home after the sun has gone down. And so, I just want you to make it through this scary moment, this scary place and get home safe. That’s what I was hoping to communicate with the title.

Q: You and V. Castro have a new collection of fiction you two edited called Latinx Screams (Burial Day Books 2020) coming out this December. Tell us about this anthology and its emphasis on Latinx and AfroLatinx authors.

A: I don’t want to say too much, since V. Castro has led this fantastic anthology. Yet, what V. Castro has done here

is pulled together a collection of established and emerging Latinx writers. We have so few collections (I'm not sure if any) that are compiled of Latinx writers from a variety of backgrounds with dark themes. These stories are terrifying and heartbreaking and beautiful. I will be publishing it on Christmas Day via my boutique press Burial Day Books. We are very excited to present this project to you, and thank you to V. Castro for her leadership in pulling this together and creating a space for Latinx voices.

Q: Diversity in publishing is a constant struggle for many. Latinx authors are indisputably underrepresented in horror. There are a number of promising Latinx authors who have been up coming. Obviously, Sylvia Moreno-Garcia has begun her trek into the ranks of the horror gods. Gabino Iglesias is on that track as well. I am a big fan of Juan Manuel Perez of Corpus Christi who considers himself more of an indigenous author than a Latinx author. You have stepped forward with some very strong novels and poetry collections. Are there other Latinx authors in the horror genre you would recommend to us? Any poets among them?

A: For poetry, Adrian Ernesto Cepeda's *La Belle Ajar*, Monique Quintana's *Cenote City* and Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*. For other Latinx writers, and these straddle genres - of course Gabino Iglesias, V. Castro, Ann Davila Cardinal, Angel Luis Colon, Richie Narvaez, Alex Segura,

Claribel Ortega, Zoraida Cordova, a fellow Latinx publisher – Leza Cantoral of Clash Books (whose works I adore), Carmen Maria Machado, Fernanda Melchor, Agustina Maria Bazterrica, and more.

Q: From your website I noted that you use two first names interchangeably. Cynthia and Cina. I read an interview of you where you noted that Cina is what your friends call you. Is there a backstory to this name?

A: My friends and family call me Cina. I'm Puerto Rican, and all Puerto Ricans have a nickname. No Puerto Rican mother ever calls you by your birth name, unless you're in trouble. If my mother calls me "Cynthia" then I know I did something wrong. To her I'm Cina and to my close friends and family as well. For a long time I thought of making Cina exclusively my writing name, but I'm stepping away from it in publishing credits. I'm slowly shifting my publishing credits to Cynthia Pelayo, maybe because I'm getting myself in my trouble. Still, my friends and family can still most certainly call me Cina.

Q: A previous volume of your poems, Poems on My Night (Raw Dog Screaming Press 2016) is described as a "response to the work of Jorge Luis Borges that examines the themes and subsequent consequences of insomnia, death, and blindness. " Poems on My Night features a large number of diverse poems all with titles in Spanish

but otherwise written in English. Each title corresponds to a poem of the same title in two collections by Borges, Poems on My Night and Selected Poems. There appear to be some homage pieces such as Borges y yo

And I followed you, through your streets, in the heat of the Argentinean sun. I drove through suburbs of mythologies, lectures of Whitman, and drank English literature. This is Borges' game and I am in it, with you. I am trapped in your eternity, my life for an escape. I have lost everything to infinity. Oblivion justifies actions to no one. These pages are my salvation, and Borges's words breathe. I rest in my fate, in my writing to you. Recognizing that I don't know who wrote this, either Borges or me.

Clearly Borges has a strong influence on you. What was it about Borges' work that made you decide to not just pay homage to him but to write your own response to each of the specific poems those two collections?

A: To me, Borges is the maestro, he is my professor. I learned more from Borges than my own MFA in Writing. I studied all of his writings, and read his *Professor Borges: A Course on English Literature*, and in fact, the PhD I started before this one was a PhD in Hispanic and Latin American Literature where I was studying Poe and Borges. I wound up dropping out of that PhD to complete a PhD in

Business Psychology (much more boring, but more practical for my career). My uncompleted dissertation was on Borges and Poe, in fact.

I could write an entire thesis on this, so will remain brief – Borges is very cerebral – everything he writes is a puzzle to be unraveled, and there are more layers of meaning in a few pages of any of his short stories than three-hundred page books.

I don't read for "fun" and I abandon a lot of books, because when I read I am looking for meaning, and if a book is not going to give me that then I will find one that does. I read to be moved, to be inspired, to think, to learn and to grow, and maybe that's why some people can't connect with my writing, because it tends to be research intense, and that's fine. I also don't want to assault my reader with a message but I want the reader to walk away with something, something meaningful, and to me what is meaningful is life, and the eternal exploration of why are we here and what is out there, and I think Borges did that expertly, and that is what I hope to continue doing in my writing.

Everything I write is heavily layered with research and meaning, and even if you can't find all of the meaning in my writings I know it's there, just like I know Borges' writing is a vast and complex labyrinth.

Q: Another poem of yours, The Red Dress, reprinted at <https://inkheist.com/2019/12/12/fiction-cynthia-cinapelayo-the-red-dress/>, was an adaption of one of Richard Matheson's stories, describing what I took to be a vampiric child influenced by her late mother and what may have been a wedding dress and held captive by a grieving but equally terrified father. A scary piece which leads the reader into a darker and darker spiral culminating with murder. These works as responses or poetical retelling of other authors were fascinating. Any other authors you have focused on?

A: There are a few authors I really enjoy. Richard Matheson is certainly one. Ray Bradbury, J.D. Salinger (his short stories and not *Catcher in the Rye*, for which he is most well known for – I never really connected with that work), Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, of course, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Steinbeck, Federico Garcia Lorca, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Agatha Christie and Neil Gaiman are just a few authors whose works I keep coming back to and who have been my major influences and likely the writers who I may be responding to in the future.

Q: I found a poem that to me highlighted much of the skills of your craft mixing a street toughness, richness of imagery, along with a hint of dark fantasy. The title literally translates to “Final Judgment House.”

CASA JUICIO FINAL

*These city streets are more than my angels, they are
my blessed demons*

*They've refrained from stabbing daggers into my
back but instead have jammed*

ice picks in my eyes forcing me never to blink

*All I see is blood running and it runs now on cold,
soulless asphalt*

*Where I've walked I've wondered if others have felt
my anguish*

These were steps I sat down on once to cry

*The trembling you feel when you walk up those stairs
are mine*

*This city has given me loneliness wrapped in wicked
misery*

*I kiss her goodnight each night and each morning
she embraces me with her rusted hope*

*We are a domestic abuse the two of us and she knows
that I will not abandon her*

*I want to walk her nighttime city streets but she keeps
me inside*

*Lions and cobras lurk behind parked cars and in
dark alleyways*

*Sometimes you can see spray painted warnings
begging intruders to turn away*

"Here be dragons"

*I'll wait until it is safe, which it will never be, but still
I will never leave her*

Such angst mixed in with this idea of a person pining for a love that will give nothing but misery and unhappiness. The other theme I see here and in many of your works is the punishment of the innocent. The good person who becomes the victim solely because they are good. No layer of gods or angels protect the vulnerable in your stories and poems, just as it seems to play out in real life. How did these themes become central to much of your work?

A: Right, in this example that love is my love of Chicago. That misery is the misery that Chicago has shown me, with loss and violence, and how cold and dreary it can get here. Also, yes, the punishment of the innocent is something that I write about quite often. It's something I've seen firsthand, that you can do everything that you are supposed to be doing, in that moment and in that place, but yet, someone else – maybe even someone you don't know or have never seen in an instant inflicts violence or pain upon you.

If you think about major anguish we have experienced in life, it's usually another person at the end of that hurt and pain. Not a thing. People are the ones who bring us our greatest love and our greatest pain.

There really is no supernatural protection in my work, because like in life, we are out in the open, exposed and unprotected.

I think much of this came about being raised Catholic and always being instructed to pray by my mother when something bad was happening. I even remember some days, when I was younger and would be so upset by something – maybe about being bullied at school (which I was relentlessly) - and crying, my father would just tell me to go to sleep, because there was nothing that could be done. If I prayed, nothing happened. If I went to sleep and woke up, the pain was still there. Praying never helped.

When I was losing children through miscarriage and went to priests, in confession and begging them to help me spiritually somehow, all they would tell me was to pray. I would light every candle I could and pray to every saint I could find, and still I would lose those pregnancies. That's one of the major reasons I left the church. I just could not find peace in my pain, and I could not accept that this pain was justified or meant to be cosmically, that if there was a God that he would want me to be suffering the way I was, and if that was his intention – for me to suffer the way I did – then I did not want anything to do with him.

Old ways die hard, and I'm still very spiritual. I pray, in my own way, but I don't believe in a God the way the Catholic

church believes in one any more. I feel like I've found some spiritual peace, finally, and I've reckoned with a lot of my own suffering, in a way. I've learned that I have suffered and no one could give me answers for why, and that it was unfair.

So a lot of this comes through in my work, of human pain, and of not knowing what is out there beyond death.

Q: I read in another interview that at that time your favorite horror novel was William Blatty's *The Exorcist*. Is that still the case? Do you consider this novel foundational to your work in any way?

A: Yes, I feel like if there's any novel I wish I could have written it would be *The Exorcist*. I still am in love with all of the imagery of the Catholic church, the ritual and the incense, the sacraments and so on. For me, personally, I cannot separate that I am who I am today because of my love of the church and all of my involvement with the church. I was a lecturer and passed out Eucharist and the wine, and was getting ready to train to give the Eucharist to the sick and the dying, before I left. I mean, I got on a plane and went to Rome when John Paul II was dying, because I had to see him. I had to be blessed by him, and we were, via live feed because he was in the hospital but he sent us blessings in Saint Peter's Square via a huge screen.

So, the church is foundational to who I am. I can't separate that. I do want to stress though that there were atrocities committed by the church, past and present, and they created a lot of pain with indigenous communities, the LGBTQ community, women and children etc., which is my second reason for leaving. I could not continue to support an organization that has caused so much pain and death.

So, I just needed to give that background, because *The Exorcist* is a very religious work. So, my fascination with *The Exorcist* is this idea that ritual (the use of the Ouija board in the book, for example) can create a supernatural effect in the physical plane (possession for example in the book), and that there are people (for example in the book it was the priests) who are so in tune with that world, in a sense, that they can manipulate that spiritual realm. Also, the idea of faith, and I'll leave it at that, because I can go on forever about faith and belief, but it's all so fascinating to me.

The Exorcist was able to highlight all of this, also show very real human suffering, the suffering of the innocent, and a lack of resolution, because sometimes there is no real resolution with suffering, the pain just remains, and that is above all horror.

Q: I was always fascinated by the concept in the book that while the “devil”, the demon Pazuzu, brought the weight of his dark magic into that room, the “good” side was defended by an agnostic and an old priest with a bad heart. While Reagan levitated objects around the room the two men used words of prayer. Only the sacrifice of Father Damian (coincidentally a devil’s name?) saved the girl. In some ways I see this in your work as well. The innocent, like Reagan, is victimized and is only saved by the sacrifice of another victim. The women in Into the Forest were those that were not saved at all. Do you see parallels from the fiction of Blatty’s work and the true crime stories in Into the Forest?

A: Exactly, only the broken, I suppose, can save. See, I’m still a Catholic at heart. You know, even if you look at the Biblical Jesus – and I’m not talking about any specific religion, but just in the Biblical interpretation of this man. This is a man who really had nothing. He had nothing to physically gain in helping people who were suffering, the poor and the sick. Yet, he believed – regardless of what you believe – Jesus of Nazareth (not Christ – he becomes the Christ after he dies) believed that he needed to suffer in order to give his fellow humans happiness. Isn’t that completely wild? Who would do that for you? For me? Who would put their way out, enter an uncomfortable situation to help me out with anything? Today, maybe just my husband. But that’s true and profound sacrifice, to put

your wealth, reputation, and physical safety – your life, give up your life even, to help someone you do not know. That is selfishness, and to me that is saintly. And that is what Father Damien did, he sacrificed himself.

The women in *Into the Forest* were not saved, and I feel like we, humanity, failed them. They were either alone and met a stranger who killed them. Or, were killed by the people who were supposed to protect them. That's terror, absolute terror, and I could not imagine those women's screams and cries for help knowing no one would ever come.

Q: I try to ask this of every poet I have interviewed. Poets I have met often fall into two camps. Some claim only to write when inspired. When the moment or the “Muse” takes them. Others, tell me they are methodical, writing every single day for some set time, perhaps even working on a goal of writing so many poems per day or week. I’ve seen some interviews of you where you described a fairly strict writing regime which included trying to record dreams as soon as you have awoken. How do you approach your writing, both in determining what to write about and the form of expression you will choose for your piece?

A: I usually like to have a set project in mind. Sometimes though, I get an idea – it's usually just an image or a bit of

dialogue in my head and I go running to my office to write it down and have to get the entire poem or story down within hours. That just happened with a short story. I had this image of an older man in a corn field at night running toward a light and I had to write his story and did so within hours.

For poetry, I like to plan a theme. It's easier for me to stay organized that way. My next collection is probably twice as daunting as *Into the Forest* so I will see how far I can get with that one, but I feel like it has another important message I would like to explore.

So like with *Poems of My Night*, it was a response collection and *Into the Forest* is a true crime collection covering cases. I like to have a tight structure to work with. That might seem limiting for some artists, but for me it provides guidance and freedom forward.

Q: As a follow up to the previous question, cliché and speculative poetry seem to be in constant conflict. Your poetry, as with many good poets, succeeds in this struggle. What advice can you give the fledging poet avoiding cliché in their speculative poems?

A: I like just listening to people talk. Write down a beautiful line someone said, or that you heard on television or in a song. Why was it beautiful? Use that as a starting

poet to write a poem. Take a favorite line from a book and build a poem from there. Overall, experiment with text and form.

Poetry should be musical. It should sound beautiful when read out loud.

I recommend anyone writing poetry to read their poem out loud twice and see how it feels. Read poetry from other poets out loud. That will help you with developing a unique style and form.

Q: As a side note to your work I thoroughly enjoyed reading your exploratory visit to discover the secret admirer of Edgar Allan Poe. <https://inthefray.org/author/cynthiapelayoextra/>. You became part of the legend I take it. I even saw some local news organizations picked up the piece. Is Poe an influence and what drew you to take up this pilgrimage to his gravesite?

A: You have found me out! I visited Poe for several years in a row on his birthday after this. It's difficult to do so now with children. I really could write an entire book on this. The PhD I started before this was a PhD in Hispanic and Latino literature where I was working on a dissertation on Poe and Borges. I left to instead complete a PhD in

Business Psychology for work. So, I have a lot of information I can go on about Poe forever.

Overall, the Poe Toaster is one of our great American mysteries. Anything and everything it seems can be discovered with a simple internet search, but not how Poe died nor who was his Toaster and why this individual toasted our dear Eddie for decades, more really as it's believed to be a family tradition passed down.

My first year attending was the year the Toaster did not show to the cemetery to toast Poe. I left the cemetery in tears to find an open liquor store and grocery store to buy cognac and flowers. I just felt like Poe needed his toast. So with cognac and three roses I toasted Poe. The media arrived as I was doing so. So I like to think I was Poe's Toaster that year. The former curator of the Baltimore Poe House and Museum gifted me with a framed piece of drywall from Poe's Baltimore home a year or so after.

Many horror writers start their love of the genre with *The Tale Tell Heart* or *The Black Cat*, and it was a similar experience for me. I was in elementary school when we read Poe and it was beautiful. I studied his work and Borges' work extensively in my MFA, particularly his development of the detective character, Dupin. Again, I can go on forever about Poe, but he's important to me and to all of literature – not just horror as he perfected our short

story form, invented the detective character we have come to recognize today and it's an American tragedy that he died alone and in a gutter. We should all honor Poe.

Q: You are the second author I have interviewed in this blog series who says they grew up in a haunted house when young. Anything you can share about that experience? Did you see or hear ghosts? I have read that you moved from stories and poems about Mexican mythology and the like to more of a focus on ghost stories. Is that still true? Did these childhood experiences influence this?

A: Yes, we had a quasi-exorcism in the house, I suppose you can say. There were constant doors slamming, and tapping on the walls and the sounds of people running back and forth. I was very young, but I remember my parents being very scared of it and telling me not to talk about it, because “when you talk about those things that gives it power” my dad would say. My parents still live in the same house and I haven't seen or heard anything strange there since.

I'm really on the fence with what I believe, but I am open to the possibility that there are energies that we cannot explain. I like to think that not everything can be explained right now, and that's true for a lot of research in the scientific community – we still don't know much about the

universe for example. Just because we do not know about it extensively does not mean that it is not real.

I have done a lot of ghost hunting, you could say. Every time I visit a new city or country I visit its most haunted location; Tower of London, Scotland Vaults, Sedlec Ossuary in Czech Republic and so many cemeteries, abandoned and active. And oddly enough, after traveling the world, the place where I feel like I saw a ghost was right in my neighborhood at my church, when I was still attending.

I entered one day and saw a nun in a full, traditional habit seated near the front. She was seated so her back was to me. When I approached the lectern and looked out at the worshippers she was gone. Now, the building next door to my church is a retirement home for nuns. I don't know if what I saw is connected to that place. I can't prove what I saw. Was I sleepy? Tired? I don't know, but I can see her now clearly, and maybe whatever I did experience was a form of comfort or a message.

I left the church. I miss it. I wanted to be a nun once, and maybe in a way what I saw knew I was leaving and it was telling me goodbye. I really think I would have been a great nun, because I love meditating, and speaking out good wishes to the universe. If associates tell me they are having a bad day or are ill, I just don't say I'm thinking of you. I

really am thinking of you and I will really speak good wishes out to the universe for you. I believe positive energy is life changing.

To add to ghosts, I do not believe ghosts are scary, if they are real. I walk through my house in the dark. If I hear a noise I go toward it. I don't run away from the possibility of something else. I feel like we should fear humans, not in the possibility of something out there like the paranormal or supernatural.

Finally, science tells us energy doesn't end, it just becomes something else. So, it's hard for me to believe that once we die we turn off like a light. I believe some part of us continues on in another form.

My earlier writing focused exclusively on Latin American folklore legend and myth, and I've moved on from it, mostly because I feel as though I completed what I set out to do with those projects. Additionally, just because I was born in Puerto Rico does not mean I should exclusively write narratives connected to the island or Latino culture. I was raised in Chicago. I was raised speaking English first. I did not learn Spanish until later. I grew up in a German, Polish and Greek neighborhood. My best friend growing up was Muslim. I've been lucky to visit 20 countries, from Iceland to the United Arab Emirates. So, I've lived a very rich life and have a lot of influences.

Many of my characters are still Latinx, like me, but the world they navigate is a diverse world, one with German folklore or French fairy tales, or ancient stories from Ancient Greece or Mesopotamia.

There are so many things I want to write and read and research. I wish I had the time. I don't write for money. It's not a source of income for me. Writing has never really made me much. I have a full time job in research, but I write because I want to create art. I'm an artist first and everything I do I come to it now with this thought of how is this literature, how is this valuable and meaningful?

Q: I also read that your parents were very superstitious. I grew up in the Rio Grande Valley on the Texas border. Many of my friends had parents and other family who practiced many interesting rituals from looking out for the “evil eye” to playing Loteria. Any of these superstitions that still stick with you or that you have passed on to your own children?

A: Yes, my mother's mother was the town healer, in that you went to her if you wanted someone to pray for you for healing. My cousin told me this one story where on Wednesdays my grandmother would literally lock herself in a room for hours and pray all day for every single person

in the family by name. Again, there goes my connection to spirituality and prayer.

My mother and father were born in the 1940s in rural Puerto Rico and lived in houses with dirt floors. My mother told me when she was little the first time she looked up and saw an airplane flying overhead she and her mother thought the world was ending. So, they came from another world my parents.

My parents have told me some of the best ghost stories I have ever heard. My mother is Catholic. My father is Evangelical. A lot of their stories have religious undertones.

The superstitions I've taken on are from my mother, her practices of lighting candles and asking saints for protection and guidance. I still light candles, and I still pray, in my own way. So, every time I'm struggling with something in life there's a candle lit in my home with an intention for a path forward.

I practice a chaotic form of spirituality, chaotic in that I have pulled from multiple faith systems to create something meaningful to me. So, I'll do things with my children like light a fire pit for Yule and we'll light incense and drink hot cocoa and we'll speak out well wishes into the night sky.

We do a lot of magical things like that in my home and to my children it's normal, meditation, positive thinking, and petitions to the universe for love and guidance.

We try not to speak negatively because we believe words are spells, words are power, so everything spoken in my house we try to speak it with positivity and love. Of course we fight and get angry, but we try to recognize that anger quickly and correct it, because bad energy produces more bad energy.

Please share several of your poetical works with us:

FROM POEMS OF MY NIGHT

Calle con almacén rosado

Those faces are gone, the ones that stood at every corner
of every day

They were the guardians of that park and this very street

This street I find myself which has riddled my dreams

The roads are so close here that I am suffocating with the
memories of its years

There, on that corner stood a weeping willow but
someone tore it down

A decade later a young man was shot and killed there, just
steps from where that tree cried
There is the basketball court, sad and empty, rusted
backboards no longer hold circled hope Water fountains
run dry here
Dreams were forged here as were prayers and curses
Right there was a wooden bench painted green and many
years ago there sat my grandfather, watching all of us
He watches us now
The corner store's windows are covered in fluorescent
yellow signs with bold pink letters Cigarettes, Candy,
Conversation, your neighborhood friend
My years were lost on this street, they melted down and
flowed into the sewer
Let me know when you find them
The streets suffer with me and it plays the musical
wailings of my life

Remordimiento por cualquier muerte

A reminded reminder of that what once was
We have forgotten that they were there once, and still
hold form
Whispered names cringed through cracked stone and
silence finds its home
You see we are ghouls but they have been baptized by the
stars and liberated

Freedom from this life's curses of trivialities; work and
play
The corpse is not an erased chalkboard for it is La Muerte
The dead stand with you, a hand rests on your shoulder
A cold kiss presses faith to your cheek
Eyes may not look upon its front steps
Feet may not walk the sidewalk toward the bodega
They think what you are thinking, right there
They sense what you are feeling, just then
We are afraid but they are redeemed
Taking from us the power of the day and the beauty of the
night

FROM INTO THE FOREST AND ALL THE WAY THROUGH

Remember Me

Into the forest and all the way through, I ask you to
follow my voice

Across the stream and through the hills, you'll find a
copse of trees

Unknown to many, lost to time, and tucked behind a
bare branch

A ball of twine, a cigarette butt, a crumpled polaroid,
you hear a giggle

The crunch of leaves, and the dread stabs your insides,
and your breath

Oh! Your breath, how your breath catches in your
throat, and you

Fall all the way down, into a hole so long ago hidden
there, and now

You are within the ground, you smell the damp earth
and pain, and

When you hear her voice you spin around and gain all
the terror she holds,

Before you there, a girl who no longer is a girl, a girl
who is bone and moss

Leaves tangled within her eye sockets, stretched down
to her finger bone

Pointing above and pointing you out, and you climb
against the rock

And stone, and she bids you adieu, begging you,
pleading you, to make it

Safe, all the way home

You Are Not Looking, I Am Right Here

In a shallow grave. Your skin smelled of oranges,
bright

And warmed by the sun, streaks of luminous hair
Blemished by earth, tainted by the touch of someone
Who did not love you. The medical examiner could
Not find you, within your breaks, and so thought both
Were separate, the missing and the murdered. You

Skipped school that day for the beach, and no young
Girl should be rewarded with terror in search of
adventure

For twenty-seven years you were one of many, Jane
Does

Missing. Persons. Pictures. Posters. On walls lined. In
Databases cold. In cabinets. Yellowing pages of dried
ink.

Have you seen her? Tell me have you seen her? Almost
Thirty years is a long time to wait. Your mother died
After twenty-two years of waiting. And when police
Officers finally approached the man suspected in your
Murder, in the murder of Elizabeth, and Tammy and
Mary,

And Rosario, and many more — he killed himself,
because

That is what cowards do.

Name: Colleen Emily Orsborn

Remains found: Daytona Beach, Florida

Race: White

Age at disappearance: 15

Year missing: 1984

Case status: Remains found, unresolved

Investigating agency:

Daytona Police Department, 386-671-5100

Cynthia (Cina) Pelayo is the author of **LOTERIA, SANTA MUERTE, THE MISSING, POEMS OF MY NIGHT, INTO THE FOREST AND ALL THE WAY THROUGH** and the upcoming **CHILDREN OF CHICAGO** by Agora/Polis Books. Pelayo is an International Latino Book Award winning author and an Elgin Award nominee. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from Columbia College, a Master of Science in Integrated Marketing from Roosevelt University, a Master of Fine Arts in Writing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a PhD candidate at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology in Business Psychology. She lives in Chicago with her family.