

An Interview with Poet Sumiko Saulson

By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron* (Weasel Press 2018)
And Student Blog Assistant Alyssa Vorobey

[The HWA welcomes Alyssa Vorobey in the role of Blog Assistant. Alyssa is a high school student with an interest in horror, especially poetry and experimental literature. Alyssa is participating in this interview and did extensive research for the interview.]

I have followed Sumiko Saulson for several years on various social media platforms. During this time, I am not sure I have ever seen a photo of Sumiko without a smile on hir face. Self-described as pansexual, polyamorous and genderqueer (nonbinary), Sumiko exemplifies the diversity that the Horror Writers Association strives to represent. Perhaps more known for hir many fiction and non-fiction works as both author and editor, Sumiko has a love and talent for poetry, bringing a unique voice. Sumiko's work in Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism has won praise and accolades from hir peers. Sumiko's *100+ Black Women in Horror Fiction* (2018) and *Black Magic Women: Terrifying Tales by Scary Sisters* (Mocha Memoirs



Press, LLC, 2018). Sumiko is a voice that will carry through our genre for many years.

ALYSSA: What was your introduction to poetry and speculative poetry?

SUMIKO: I have been a poet for longer than I have been a speculative fiction author. I started writing poetry in grade school, and had a little business writing little poems for people's wedding invitations when I was nine years old. I gave the money to my mom to help pay our bills and was pretty proud of myself. In junior high school they taught us how to write in loose iambic pentameter. Edgar Allen Poe was a big influence at that time. In high school I picked up a bunch of vinyl with William Burroughs, Lydia Lunch, and a bunch of beat poets on it. I was in an article about up-and-coming Beat poets in the San Francisco Chronicle when I was 20 years old, and I put out a couple of DIY chapbooks in the zinemaking tradition when I was in my late teens and early 20s.

ALYSSA: When you read back your poems, do you find additional meanings and subtext in them?

SUMIKO: Because I have bipolar disorder, I sometimes write poetry in an emotional fugue and then come back and read it over and decipher and edit it in a calmer state of mind. As a result I do find additional meaning. Sometimes I stop and look up words I wrote to make sure I am communicating as intended, for instance.

ALYSSA: How does your intersectionality influence your poetry? Are there any particular experiences that you often write about?

SUMIKO: I live on the intersections of the spaces I occupy as a marginalized person – being of Black, and Ashkenazi Jewish heritage, queer, and disabled. Current events as they affect the Black and LGBTQ communities often end up in my poems. I have bipolar disorder and PTSD. Both of those conditions have a lot of impact on the worlds I build as a horror writer and poet. I have also written a lot of poetry about my struggles with endometriosis, which caused me physically disabling chronic pain throughout my 20s and 30s. And of course I write about being Black quite a lot, not only as it affects me personally, but as it has affected my mother, and my family, and my community.

ALYSSA: Some of your poems have protagonists or narrative arcs. What do you try to represent in them?

SUMIKO: When I write specifically, horror poetry, I usually am telling a story. The narrative arc is designed to draw the reader into the world I am building. To do so, I have to figure out ways in which the reader might find common ground with a protagonist or narrative voice that is very different from their own. What frightens, or angers, the protagonist that the reader might identify with? I need the reader to feel something for the protagonist, so that they care what happens in the story.

ALYSSA: What are some of the senses you try to invoke in your readers?

SUMIKO: If I want to disturb people, and go for the eerie kind of scare, then touch may be involved. Not active touching which is controlled by the character, but passive touch. Mysterious things touching you are usually more terrifying than you touching the things. One of my English teachers told me I was great at grossing people out, and meant it as a compliment. What

people see, hear, and smell tends to compose a lot of what makes them cringe. I also like to create an emotional atmosphere with my poetry.

ALYSSA: Your poetry is very rhythmic and uses a lot of rhyme. Tell me a bit about your writing and editing process.

SUMIKO: I have spent a spoken word poet since I was a teenager in the mid eighties. I tend to focus on rhythm, assonance, and consonance. I usually read the poem aloud as soon as I complete the first draft. I fuss a lot over using the right word to get the sound I want. I use thesauruses a lot as you can imagine – both the physical kind and online. Often changing a single word will add layers of additional meaning to the original phrase so I try to find words that sound right and also convey the meaning I want.

ALYSSA: What is something you'd like to see more of in speculative poetry?

SUMIKO: I would like to see more folk voices and diverse voices in speculative poetry. Genre fiction, including speculative poetry, has genre tropes that readers are widely familiar with. The more it is interwoven with other writing traditions, the more these walls are broken down in order to create something new and unique in its field.

DAVID: Following up from some of Alyssa's questions, reading your work I potentially see a number of diverse influences. In *Under the Water*, a poem named as a Horror Addicts' Editors Picks: Next Great Horror Writer pick in 2019, your choice of language, tone and even rhyme reminds me of Samuel Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

*Risen have you from the darkest depths where
men do not reside/ I gave you a place within
my skin where creatures dark abide / Do not
leave me alone nor recede like the sand does
from the tide / But carry me along with ye...
astride my floating bounty be / Feast upon the
only vessel strong enough to return ye to sea*

Others invoke Amiri Baraka or Nikki Giovanni with their sharp revolutionary overtones

Half my bloodline arrived in America in chains / From West Africa, where it pains me to say / The colonizers burned and looted as well as enslaved / Erasing our history so they can pretend / That we don't have any today

The voices you provoke in my head are likely of my own making I suppose but which poets do you consider your inspiration and why?

SUMIKO: I have in fact, read *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* so it is possible that I was influenced by it to some extent. Any revolutionary overtones are likely owing to Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou. But I have read Amiri Baraka. As a spoken word poet I am also influenced by lyricists like Tupac Shakur. I am influenced by poetry that is associated with pop culture. I was introduced to Warsan Shire because

of Beyonce's Lemonade. I have also read plenty of Linda Addison and Rain Graves, and I am sure been influenced by them.

DAVID: One poem you shared with us, *Regarding Nina Simone's Bad Reputation*, was so powerful in describing what it is to be an African American in a white dominated American culture. One stanza hit me very hard:

A caricature in an Octavia Spencer movie / A nutcase like Stephen King's Mr Toomey / I thought I was a horror writer / But it seems / I will only ever be / A sassy black woman meme

Your social commentary mixed with formalistic poetry, at times invoking a call to ancient gods, is very well done. Do you consider yourself a poet of revolution, or even evolution? What senses do you want to provoke in your readers with these themes?

SUMIKO: My mother was constantly being compared to Nina Simone, which she took as a compliment, because she was a huge fan. But essentially, these comparisons were being made because she was a singer who was Black, dark-skinned, and had bipolar disorder.

I wrote *Regarding Nina Simone's Bad Reputation* in the months following my mother's death. Like her, I am bipolar. For Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, Sandra Bland and many other Black women and femmes, living at the intersection of misogynoir and mental illness meant constantly being gaslit. The Octavia Spencer film *Ma* came out that year, and it was all about this woman being brutalized and then becoming a villain who was also a caricature.

I don't know if it is revolutionary to write poetry about a society that ruins mental health of Black women and femmes through centuries of systematic oppression, and then labels us as loud, dangerous,

and irrational so that it can continue to exploit us. Maya Angelou published *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969, a year after I was born.

If my poetry were capable of causing a revolution that would create any sort of change in an environment that systematically destroys Black communities through gentrification, ruins our mental through institutionalized poverty and the school to prison pipelines, I would of course want that to occur.

But the reality is, ***Regarding Nina Simone's Bad Reputation*** is an expression of emotional pain over the fact that my mother lived and died under that yoke of oppression so persistent that all a poet like Maya Angelou could do was try to humanize African Americans to people who still have not yet granted us full personhood. I mean this is the same world George Floyd was murdered in more than a year after my mother died.

DAVID: You have been very active in the Horror Writers' Association and both you and the HWA have benefited from it. In 2016, you were awarded the HWA StokerCon Scholarship from Hell. For our readers the winner of the Scholarship From Hell receives domestic coach airfare (contiguous 48 states) to and from a StokerCon venue, a 4 night stay at the convention, free registration to StokerCon, and as many workshops as the winner wanted to attend. Recently you were named as the Social Media Manager for the HWA. Have you found a home with the HWA? What experiences with the Stokercons you attended can you share with the readers?

SUMIKO: I have been to two StokerCons. The first one was the one I got the *Scholarship from Hell* for. My longtime friend Rain Graves, a Stoker Award winning poet, introduced me to a bunch of friends of hers who would be at StokerCon in Las Vegas in 2016. Among them were Marge Simon and Linda

Addison, both of whom were really great and took me under their wing. But Linda, especially, was supportive towards me. She got me on a Diversity Panel, which was where I met Greg Herren, another LGBTQ author. He's in New Orleans and my heart goes out to him and everyone else in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida.

I am a horror blogger, and had done a bunch of blog series for Women in Horror Month between 2013 and 2016. As a result, a lot of people knew who I was, both from the Scholarship from Hell, and the 60 Black Women in Horror series on my blog.

I had a wonderful time, and it was a very exciting and truly life changing experience for me. These kinds of awards are really important for authors who are just starting out.

The second I made it to was the 2017 StokerCon in Long Beach. I first met Tananarive Due there. We were signed up for the same book signing slot. That was the highlight of that StokerCon for me. One of

the things I used my 2020 Diversity Grant for was to sign up for “The Sunken Place,” an online course on African American horror she teaches with her husband, Steven Barnes.

DAVID: You certainly bring diversity to the horror field. But in the field of horror poetry, though growing, there are not many persons of color, especially African American persons of color who are well known in the HWA. How can we all change this? How can we encourage BIPOC to not just write horror, but speculative poetry, including horror? What is needed for BIPOC to break through the many years and layers of barriers to make a BIPOC poet as commonplace as any other poet.

SUMIKO:

If there is one thing that 35 years on the spoken word poetry circuit in Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley has taught me it is

that there definitely isn't any shortage of BIPOC poets.

Many BIPOC poets write about our lived experience. Deciding that it is okay to write speculative poetry means moving over into writing fictionalized worlds and characters which can still illuminate lessons from our lived experience, but in different ways.

When I wrote *60 Black Women in Horror*, and later *100+ Black Women in Horror*, my approach was to uncover the horror writers who already existed. I asked a question, over and over again. It was, "why don't people think of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a horror novel?" The answer, of course, was that people didn't think of her as a horror writer, so they didn't see what was right under their nose. *Beloved* is a Southern Gothic horror story.

Similarly, there are BIPOC poets who do write speculative poetry, including horror poetry. They are either not well known, or people do not think of

what they write as horror. Warsan Shire's "Trying to Swim With God" (from *Teaching My Mother To Give Birth*) sounds like horror poetry to me, even though she is not a horror poet.

I try to bring that same energy I brought to *60 Black Women in Horror* to the Social Media Manager position at the Horror Writers Association. I feel that if you do enough research, you will find these people are in the world. The HWA needs to know they exist, and they likewise need to know the HWA exists.

DAVID: Your body of work includes fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and even graphic novels written and illustrated by you. What do you think that each of these talents add to the other? A lot of fiction writers are scared of poetry but man, what they write is prose poetry many times. What advice would you give to your fellow authors on how to successfully cross over and navigate different art forms?

SUMIKO: For me, creative arts help me to process things and are essential to my mental health and well-being. When I get writer's block, drawing usually helps me to get past it. So the first graphic novel I did, "Agrippa," was based on a short story of the same name I had previously published. My father was dying of cancer and I was too depressed to write, so I illustrated it. My mom asked me to illustrate her story "Living A Lie," so she actually wrote that one.

You're absolutely correct about prose poetry. Horror writers are especially prone to graphic visual descriptions in our writing. Unlike thrillers, which are fast paced, we stop and smell... and touch... and prick our fingers on... and then bleed on and throw up in the roses. After that we smell the vomit. So, we definitely do have what it takes to write horror poetry.

My advice on learning to write poetry is, to try to have fun and get caught up on the notion that one must be brilliant right out of the gate. Also remember that rhyming isn't necessary. It's one type of poetry, not all poetry.

DAVID: 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. How do you approach your writing, both in determining what to write about and the form of expression you will choose for your piece?

SUMIKO: I create art every day, but the kind of art I create is generally based on where the muse takes me. That is to say, if I have writer’s block, I will go out of the room I write in (my bedroom) and go into the room I work on art in (my kitchen). Sometimes I will sit in front of the television drawing and watching my favorite shows. I basically create in a visual medium until my brain decides it is ready to write.

That said, I know I can actually write the other way – that is, to block out some time to write, and write in that time. However, when I get into a mood to write first, or

take time out to do something that is more tactile, like paint, draw, or sculpt, my writing is usually better. It's more moving and less technical.

DAVID: Another “stock” question: What advice can you give the fledging poet on how to use archetypes without resorting to cliché? That is, how do you write dark poetry without imitating the poets that inspired you to write dark poetry?

SUMIKO: Decide that you don't have to be brilliant. As long as you are convinced that everything you do has to be a work of genius, you are going to force yourself to do a lot of really labored imitations of whoever you most admire. I also highly recommend reading to an audience if you can. Interacting with audiences gives you confidence in sounding like yourself. Knowing your audience will help you embrace your own voice.

DAVID: What is next for you? Are you working on any new volumes or even scholarly works relating to speculative poetry we should be looking for?

SUMIKO: I have been working on a poetry chap book for awhile now. The working title I had for it was *Emotional Side Chicks*, but then I put some of the poem in a short story collection called *The Void Between Emotions*. My most recent title for the project is *Within Me, Without Me*.

Please share with us a few of your favorite pieces:

Shades of Domesticity

Horror Writers Association Poetry Showcase VII (2020)

On an upwardly-curved hook of steel
Thickened base narrows to tip cruel
Its end sheathed in fleur-de-lis
Base encrusted in blood-ruby jewel

Sits one terrycloth robe of a pair, hers and his
Only hers is skewered in the air
His hidden in abysmally dismal dark cubes
At the very back of this bathroom

Folded and still, now his name-engraved towels
O.R. stands for Oliver Reed, and the owls
That he loved so glare at her accusingly now

And is this shade of domestic bliss
His ghost drains her of life
And awaits in every corner
She wished she were dead instead
That Oliver might mourn her
Not til death would they part
At the altar, he'd warned her

“Death come and take me,” Shelly pled
Oliver's towel in her hand wrung upon her death bed

Heart racing, skin gray, and wasting
Tired, at ill ease, body filled with disease
A maleficent wheeze escaped her bone-dry lips
While the banshees appraised her withering hips

“The time has come for you and I
To divorce, in the only way we can,”
She said, and lowered her head, resigned
To leave behind her life with a dead man

Under the Water

HorrorAddicts' Editors Picks: Next Great Horror Writer (2019)

Over sea, floating ye, staying abreast of watery crests
Midwinter air caresses curls unfurling over briny sea
Cool wet skin, paper thin... I can see your soul within
Every capillary pumping blood, intestinal processes digesting food
Your loving heart plain to see... how intimate your transparency

A sea-deep mystery, stories untold, windows into your ancient soul,
Your eyes speckled, flecks of gold cascading within jet black coal
Encasing your exquisite charms, enfolded within my fragile arms,
I am the contemplator of your delicacy, hear ye now my mortal pleas
May your ethereal heart, thorny spine and eternal love be ever mine

Adrift on my back, your tentative fingers in mine entwined

Long slender tail wrapped around my thighs, tendrils twixt toes
The smooth flesh of your undercarriage where barnacles grow
My flesh puckers where their tiny mouths burrow into my skin
Digesting the healthy white blood cells within

Risen have you from the darkest depths where men do not reside
I gave you a place within my skin where creatures dark abide
Do not leave me alone nor recede like the sand does from the tide
But carry me along with ye... astride my floating bounty be
Feast upon the only vessel strong enough to return ye to sea
The curve of my hip rises over the crest of the wave
Like manatees mistaken for mermaids in ancient days
High upon my waist your appendages rest, rising and falling
With baited breath against my naked breast, bare as my soul
As we drift, intertwined, out to the darkest depths of ancient seas

Now the time has come to sink below, and mystery
Is akin to fear, I am not sure that I should trust you
But I can't seem to do that which would separate us
So I hold you near and prepare myself, emptying lungs
Of unnecessary breath, as I prepare to enter your icy depths

“It is good,” I sigh, floating over torrid waves near watery graves
Past broken ships torn asunder adrift in somber, pallid fog
Your hand in mine, you guide me sweet through jagged caves of
coral deep
Caverns stained sinister red with the blood of shattered sailors misled
It is only I you chose to guide into your hidden realm of volcanic
caves

“It is good now, and gets better still,” you insist,
Demanding I become servant to your capricious will
I kiss skeletal hands upon which lichens creep
Extending their long fingers aloft from the deep
The seaweed embraces their distended, rotting skin

“These are the mortals who have joined me
Under the sea, giving their useless lives willingly,”
You coo into my ear, tender and sweetly sighing
While my fingers caress the bloated flesh
Of a young merchant seaman beautifully dying

“Become my queen,” you sing in melodious strain

Of aural waves weaving in and out of the subsonic range
Your fingers are tendrils that kiss and caress aching skin,
Your hair smells like sea foam, dried kelp, and summer breeze
“Think of the human life on which we shall feed...”

“Be only mine leave your seafaring comrades behind,
There flesh is best suited for that upon which immortals dine
In the days when Poseidon was worshipped and the Kraken king
These humans would offer me most anything, their nubile
Children fresh and young bound for me to dine upon...”

Join me and let’s start this worship anew, the flesh of men
Will belong to you, you will dine on the tender flesh
Of misbegotten youth, called time after time onto rocky shore
By the lovely sound of your siren voice, shipwrecked and helpless
And waiting for you, brainwashed and given no choice...

Feast upon the maiden’s breast, tear her heart from her heaving chest
For you, my love, only the best in all things, trust and believe this
true
But if truth it is not, and so I lie, think of the glorious ways you might
die?

There is no need to fear the dark, this is my kingdom, come within
What is there to fear, mortal? Even if you lose, you win.”

A Travesty in Timbuktu

“Within Me, Without Me” (2021)

Ya’ll act like I’m Killmonger when I try to tell you
About how they looted my ancestral home in Benin
And burned down the libraries at Timbuktu

You think I am trying to be edgy
By claiming my history
Defending your European roots
As the true source of all mystery

All art, love and light and all that is true
The source of shiny, happy feelings
With vaulted Gothic ceilings
The art of the European masters
Not their Bertha Mason enslaved mulatto bastards...

Half my bloodline arrived in American in chains

From West Africa, where it pains me to say
The colonizers burned and looted as well as enslaved
Erasing our history so they can pretend
That we don't have any today

How you brag and bray
About your superior role
In the cultural landscape of history
Dismissing me and my kind
For being behind a movement
To fund black churches that burned to the ground
Because you find them of less import
And historical relevance
And European elegance
If you know what I mean

The Quai Branly museum in Paris
Just a thirteen minute drive away
From Notre Dame still houses, today
Some of the thousands of treasures
The French stole from my ancestors

In 1892 from the Kingdom of Dahomey

So if I decide to send some funds

To a black church in the south

Instead of Notre Dame

Try not to pout and act out

Like I defamed you

For my ancestor's histories were stolen

Burned and erased

With no reparations made to this very day

No, the artwork has not been replaced

To the land from which we were also stolen away

By the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade.

Regarding Nina Simone's Bad Reputation

“Within Me, Without Me” (2021)

How it pained me to see my mother

In all her grace and glory

Baited to make her angry

So she could fit into expectation

As long and lithe as Josephine Baker

As tall and muscular as Grace Jones

How you would fetishize her anger

A proud black goddess magnificent

Black and magnificent was her nickname

Her bearing and conduct intimidatingly same

With a long black cape and a lovely choker

More gothic than any novel by Bram Stoker

Statuesque and dark skinned like Roxie Roker

She fought to stay whole and so no

Body broke her...

But her fight to stay whole had a price to it

A people saying she was not nice to it

Like Nina Simone, she stood moody, alone

Her mood having no artifice or device to it

My mother bemoaned her choice

A white man married two kids and divorce
My white father stealing her black voice
Black and magnificent was her nickname
She who called herself Krishna
Was one and the same

How hard it is to walk this land
A paler ghost of she...
Who holds her invisible hand
And tries to make her way through,
Win or lose...
And finds herself shod in Mama's shoes

How thick and wide and fat I am, me
Cast inside your roles of Mammy
Escape we'd love to but, now can we?
I am too old and fat to run away
From the roles in which you have me enslaved
My mom was Krishna, I am Ska
But to your ass I look like Ma

A caricature in an Octavia Spencer movie
A nutcase like Stephen King's Mr Toomey
I thought I was a horror writer
But it seems
I will only ever be
A sassy black woman meme

Your racism sewed up tight
Tattered at the seams
It holds up your privilege white
Makes black folks wrong
And you always right

Nina Simone is dead
but her bad reputation lives on
Bad for being a domestic violence victim
Who held her head up too long
Looked too strong
And showed too much personal
Pain
In her song

A woman done wrong
But like my Mama
She was Black
So you never see pain
Just drama

Systemic Issue

“Within Me, Without Me” (2021)

When I remember you sweetly, and
Softly touching your feet...
If your foot was in my hand
And I massaged toes, long and lean
And ran fingers over seams
Of two layers of stockings
One fishnet, one plain
To prevent the slippage of toes
Between fishnet in hose
Made of black lace windows
And in those, and in those,,,

And in noisy repose
If I cat-booped your nose
If I blew bubbles on your navel
And heaven in those
Air blown against skin, and then
You within...

Not taken away, but
For ever remaining beyond trouble
And pain and my memory stained
With port-wine marks of you within
On me deeper than skin
Deeper than tattoo ink or pen
On the paper I carry to bury necessary

Memories of you, we one, we two
Me wrapped in you...
Part and parcel of you...
Memories too true to dismiss them
Or dismiss you when
You're part of my system

Automatic writing both enlightening
And frightening and pages I crafted
Inside me you laughed, it
Was under my skin
Where I still
hold you
within

Killer Romance

Things That Go Bump in My Head (2013)

People love, you know...
We do love, untrue love,
and there are puppies and kittens,
chubby babies who don't
have bows...
and arrows...

All trivialized in February
(that was my grandpa's birthday)
Because they are now

Iconic representations
of an infatuation
More impure than
The sweet-smelling rose
We chose
To kill, to represent...
Incense, sickly sweet
I have allergies
It makes me sick

It reeks...
like a grape-favored cigarillo
And I know that you know
When it lies...

I like the natural
look of love
You know, the way it is.
I said I was tired
And you didn't keep me
Up all night...

Almost like you recognized
I was a human being
With needs
Like sleep

To me, that is love.

But I am not
Romant-ick...
It makes me sick
Like if sex is good
You don't always have to
Talk about it
You're too busy
Doing it...
And love is like that

If you do love
True love
Not just constantly hot
New love...

It's real.

Like a kitten, not a card

Like a baby, not a cupid

Like a grandpa, not a holiday

Like a real, live, rosebush

It lives because

You tend it

Like a garden

I water my garden

I don't just

Write poems to it

Bio: Sumiko Saulson is a science-fiction, fantasy and horror writer and graphic novelist. Ze was the 2016 recipient of the Horror Writer Association's Scholarship from Hell, and 2018 winner of the Afrosurrealist Writers Workshop Short Story Award. Sumiko Saulson is a cartoonist, science-fiction, fantasy and horror writer, editor of *Black Magic Women*, *Scry of Lust* and *100 Black Women in Horror Fiction*, author of *Solitude*, *Warmth*, *The Moon Cried Blood*,

Happiness and Other Diseases, Somnalia, Insatiable, Ashes and Coffee, and Things That Go Bump in My Head. Ze wrote and illustrated comics *Mauskaveli*, *Dooky* and graphic novels *Dreamworlds* and *Agrippa*. Ze writes for the SEARCH Magazine and the San Francisco Bayview column “Writing While Black.” The child of African American and Russian-Jewish parents, a native Californian and an Oakland resident who’s spent most of hir adult life in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ze is pansexual, polyamorous and genderqueer (nonbinary).