

It's All About Poetry After All: An Interview With Four All-Star Non-Poets About Poetry

By David E. Cowen and Alyssa Vorobey



John F.D. Taff

**Dr. Isobelle
Carmody**

Lucy Taylor

**Dr. Danel P.
Olson**

John F.D. Taff is known in the horror business as the “King of Pain.” Isobelle Carmody is known in her native Australia as the “Red Queen.” Lucy Taylor is often called the “Queen of Erotic Horror.” Danel P. Olson is the “Professor” or as I like to call him “Doctor Goth.” Each of them represents excellence in dark and speculative fiction crossing many genres.

John Taff has twice been nominated for Bram Stoker Awards for both Short Fiction and Fiction Collection. John has also edited numerous fiction anthologies featuring the best known horror writers currently. Isobelle Carmody is a multiple winner of the Australia’s Aurealis, Ditmar and Children's Book Council of Australia Awards as well as

many others. Her YA fantasy novels are cherished in her home country by throngs of fans. Lucy Taylor received the Bram Stoker and the International Horror Guild Award for Best First Novel and has been nominated for other works since. Danel P. Olson's editing work for the *Exotic Gothic* series, a groundbreaking series on international horror, was given both the Shirley Jackson and World Fantasy Award (which he won again for another unrelated collaboration with Patrick McGrath) among numerous nominations for both awards along with nominations for the Bram Stoker Award for nonfiction as well.

These are substantial authors influencing us today. When it comes to fiction, when they speak we learn. When they write we are given poetry in prose form across their many genres. And that is why they are here with us today; to talk about poetry. They are not known for writing poetry. They do not aspire to be poets, even if their writings become poetic at times. Little known to most of their readers and fans is that they are lovers of poetry. They read it, support it and acknowledge the influence poetry has had on their writings.

Our HWA Student Assistant, **Alyssa Vorobey**, and I asked these four to discuss poetry with us.

David: I've heard from each of you over the years how poetry influenced your writing and life. Your affection

for poetry strikes me as deep and perhaps foundational. For each of you please share with us the experiences that best describe that.

***John:** Poetry is integral to who I am as a writer, even though I don't write much of it these days. Sounds strange, I know, but my love of poetry goes back to my early days as a reader, and it informs how I write on a bedrock level. My first experiences with poetry were with Shelley, Shakespeare, Edward Lear, and, perhaps not coincidentally, Poe. Their work stayed with me in my prose writing through an attention to the rhythm and meter of a sentence, to finding the exact right word, to using punctuation to guide readers into how I want a sentence to read. I can't stress enough how important that solid rock of a foundation poetry is to my work.*

***Isobelle:** I did not encounter poetry in any substantial way until I was an adult. No one in my home read poetry and at school I was exposed to poetry that was largely nationalistic and seemed to refer to near history that was thin and white and male. Nothing to do with me. It was not until I was older and staying in Paris in the Keesing Studio on a grant, that I met the Czech poet and jazz musician Jan Stolba, that my love affair with poetry really began. His engagement with and in poetry challenged my ignorance. And of course, I saw that poetry was not a nationalistic forum for him. In fact, it was a form of resistance.*

Politically, he was an underdog in a country occupied by Russian aggressors. For him poetry was truth in code. It led me to the idea of poetry as something that held secret truths that had to be unlocked. It is ironic that my Czech was too bad for me to be able to read Jan's poetry, which is complex and layered and plays with language. However, our conversations and letters were often about language, and poetry crept in. Gradually I learned that poetry was not something you mined for a clear story or message. You experienced it. Later our daughter wrote really astonishing poetry from a very young age. I was really amazed by how easily she did it, as if it she had been born into the country of poetry and spoke its language, while I was an immigrant always trying to extend my visa.

Lucy: *Because poetry is such a powerful expression of emotion, I was drawn to it at an early age. Expression of feelings was not allowed in the home I grew up in, so discovering poetry made me realize I wasn't the only person whose stoic exterior harbored an inner world filled with loneliness, anger and longings for things hard to express. Poetry put into words the emotions I'd been taught were forbidden and shameful.*

The first encounter with poetry that I recall was Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" which I found in one of my mother's text books. When I wanted to talk about it, her explanation of the verses was quite

literal—a man going home late in the day--but I knew that “miles to go before I sleep” referred to death. That fascinated me, both the theme and the realization that you could write about death (and other taboo subjects) in a way that the message could be expressed subtly, with room for multiple interpretations. The poet could express ideas and emotions with what I now know is called plausible deniability. I found that liberating and exciting. I realized poetry can be a form of rebellion. The poet could lay bare her or his most intimate experiences, but safely, in a way that not everyone would understand what was really being said.

A few years later, at about age ten, I discovered “Ozymandias” by Shelley and found the line “Look on my Works ye Mighty and despair!” to be both sobering and stunning. It confirmed my fear that death and destruction come to all and yet provided a kind of relief--that everything is impermanent. Myself included. I realized I wasn't crazy, that this was the way of the world.

Danel: *Poetry in lullabies, nursery rhymes, jumping-rope songs (“Lizzie Borden had an axe..”), and Old Testament blank-verse psalms (literally, “sacred songs”). I heard them read to me as a little boy from female voices. I was always meeting this force that is poetry everywhere. Simple seeming at first, but richly symbolic later. Lyrics attached to sweet melody, but intense in their acts. Easy to*

remember then and always haunting now when given voiceover in a scary movie, or used as an epigraph in a novel. They are drops of night.

Do we ever recover from the poems we heard as a kid?

Alyssa: What were your first encounters with dark poetry, and how did they shape your view of literature?

John: Poe. My family has a ten-volume set of the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe from the turn of the 20th Century. I read from it exhaustively when I was a kid, so I was exposed to his prose and his poems. I think he was my first exposure to real poetry, aside from Edward Lear and Dr. Seuss, that is. I was amazed that someone could maintain that overwhelming sense of fear and dread in so short a form. That he could conjur up those images and that tone in so few words. I think it went into my mental filing cabinet, then was drawn out when I started writing short fiction. As a new writer of short fiction, I was befuddled somewhat about how to cram a story into a short form. It was that early look at how Poe did it, both in his short prose, but also his poetry that was my key. That kind of distillation of what you're trying to get across using as few words as possible—but then having to choose the exact right words to elicit this—is something I still cling tightly to when writing.

Isobelle: The first poets I encountered that spoke to me were the metaphysical poets. I was in first year at university and the whole year was overshadowed by the death of my 19 year old brother who was killed in a car crash; it was an awful iteration of disaster, because my father had died in a car crash when I was 14. I was suddenly thrown back into that childhood when my simple uneducated fearful mother was left with 8 children. Her fears for us and of authority, of possible imagined disasters, infected us all in different ways. For me, that death ended safety and certainty. Reading the metaphysical poets in the aftermath of my brother's death I felt again all the weight of that shadow side of life which was pain and loss and grief and injustice. The metaphysical poets evoked these things. William Blake offered all the visionary sensuous beauty I felt for the world, but he also wrote about the loss of innocence and ugliness and fear and cowardice and deceit. The potential ugliness inside human beings. So did Robert Frost. I felt it to be an encounter with truth. I read Poe too, partly drawn to the themes of grief and darkness in his work, but also because there was a grotesque exaggerated quality in his poetry and short stories, in both form and content, that seemed another kind of truth to me. But for me, that was an intellectual encounter. The deeper relationship with poetry came later.

Lucy: My first encounter with dark poetry was in a high school French class, with Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal. I think reading his poetry in a foreign language heightened the sense of wonder and at the same time, as I pored over unfamiliar words in a dictionary, I marveled at the depth of his vision and his courage for putting it into words. His "La Charogne" (The Corpse) is a viscerally repellant but artistically haunting description of a putrefying corpse. "Le Mort Joyeux" (A Joyful Death) is a sonnet in which the poet contemplates his own death and invites the crows to feast upon his rotting flesh. Again and again, in Baudelaire's poetry, the fragile and oh-so-temporary nature of our flesh and bones are rendered exquisitely clear.

As a teenager, I found Baudelaire's willingness to examine death unflinchingly not only shocking, but morbidly alluring. Dark poetry was an open door into a frightening reality few people I knew at the time were willing to talk about. I didn't do drugs, but immersed myself in Baudelaire.

To attest to my attachment to Baudelaire, at this moment I have that high school copy of Les Fleurs du Mal, dated 1968, on my bedside table, the book having somehow become lost long ago on its way to the library.

Of course, there were many other poets who influenced my young adulthood. Names that come to mind: Poe, of course, whose work thrilled me with its relentless air of foreboding, W. H. Auden, Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou, Rainer Maria Rilke. All contributed to my love of words steeped in profound emotion.

Danel: *“Three Blind Mice.” A quick woman, a sharp knife, & an unwary rodent trio. Even the youngest child knows where that plot’s going. But the sheer joy with which the poem is read and played shocks. It is a carving-up made so merry and danceable. “Ring a Ring o’ Roses” is unfailingly dark no matter how many times you read it: we “all fall down” dead, but always sing it with joi de vivre! “It’s Raining, It’s Pouring” was constantly recited to me by my cousin Bonnie, and I kept thinking of that old man who couldn’t get up, who reminding me of my big bald Uncle Roy who was a tippler. He also had a long stairway, and one morning he could never get up again, either.*

I keep journeying back to the source. That’s how primal poetry is: sutured to our earliest days and our first lispings of language. Because these poems are short enough to be quickly memorized by children, or sometimes have some tags in the rhythm or possible rhyme that excite our minds, they always stay with us in a way that other art does not. The revelation is that all the poetry I was introduced to was openly or secretly dark. That creates an built-in

expectation for later poetry that we anticipate when we are adolescents and adults.

Alyssa: It is common to ask what prose writers can learn from poetry, and it usually comes down to using more literary devices; alliteration, anaphora, and so on. But what is it that poets can learn from prose?

John: Meter, meter, meter. The way a sentence flows, whether read aloud or silently. The way the words form a rhythm, how punctuation slows things or speeds them up. Finding the exact right words to convey the ideas of the sentence, even if those words are unusual or archaic. Poetry helps me wring every last drop of meaning, tone and rhythm from a sentence, which is especially helpful when you're bound by a certain number of words. Poetry helps me get more bang for my buck, as it were.

Isobelle: To be honest, I don't think what I have learned from poetry is any of these things. I think poetry is Ursula Le Guin's language of the night. It is sensuous condensing of ideas and questions. Poetry teaches me about succinctness. It teaches me to regard every word as important and full of potential. It teaches me that a few words can contain the most profound stories and ideas. It teaches me about juxtaposition and silene. I am not sure what poetry can learn from prose. Poetry is the teacher.

Lucy: There's much that prose writers and poets can learn from each other to the betterment of their own craft. As a non-poet, I can just say I've read poems where the author seemed to "fall in love" with their own words and lost track of where the poem was going. The poem seemed overburdened with literary devices and ambiguity.

I think poetry often requires of the reader a certain tolerance, even affection for, the evocative and convoluted, a Nautilus shell where multiplicities of meaning intertwine. The poem may be a meandering path to several potential destinations, where one can pause to muse about an unusual word or expression, or double back to revisit a particularly engaging metaphor. For those willing to read slowly and reflect, there may be fresh insights or unexpected subtleties, sometimes a surge of emotion. But vibrant, dense, or soothing though a poem may be, a reader expecting more clarity may lose interest or give up entirely.

I confess I have been that reader, just as I've read prose I felt could benefit from a touch of alliteration or a well-placed simile.

That said, I think that from prose, a poet might learn to write with greater clarity and precision, to remain faithful to a central theme without rambling so far afield the theme is in danger of being buried in the verbiage. A poet might learn from prose to cultivate a leaner style and an economy

of syntax. A stanza or a few lines in a more precise style could offer a change of pace among denser passages.

Of course, there's considerable crossover between poetry and prose. Clearly some poems are structured in a narrative arc that would be familiar to any reader of fiction. And I've read prose so rich and dense it can feel as though I'm falling head-first into a delectable souffle of pure poetry. In those cases, I often go back and reread those passages just to feast on the beauty of it. Likewise a solid narrative can be enhanced with poetic imagery and ambiguity.

Ideally then, the poet can find balance between the abstract and ineffable and a structure that maintains the poem's intent while engaging the reader.

Danel: *Not being a poet, I hesitate to answer. But as a reader of poetry, I can share my wish. Prose is often interested in extended exploration, a long adventure in a novella, a novel that captures a place and time (or places and times), or a study that takes a research question to the further reaches, often 300 or more pages. What a poet may see from this is a longing from readers for a sustained meditation on a time or place, rather than a scattering of poems whose relation is distant.*

*I would love to read more books of poetry that are set in one geographical place, a highly researched and extended meditation like David Cowen's *The Seven Yards of Sorrow* (Weasel Press, 2016) which takes one actual historical Galveston cemetery and offers us what the still vying souls there are doing now, out of the bodies that died from the time of that city's great flood over 120 years ago. I love to read about ground that a poet has actually walked over repeatedly, whose tombs he has photographed, and whose names on those headstones are known well to him, by acts in court and beyond. Darkly Whitmanesque is *The Seven Yards*. I hold it in two realms: that graveyard is a place I have strolled on ghost tours at night, but it is also a place in the imagination, inhabited by the minds of murderers I have now met through poet David Cowen, and their murdered; racists and the victims of racism; and a ghostly sexton who knows where, as they say, all the skeletons are buried.*

Alyssa: You've likely encountered characters either in works you've read or works you've written that fit the archetypes of the writer, the eccentric archivist or librarian and the poet. More often than not, they exist in isolation of each other. People, especially those who feel themselves to belong to one of these groups, can relate to a lot of the struggles these characters experience. Why do you think there is a particular distinction between the writer and the poet, and more

importantly, which do you think is better-equipped to handle a zombie horde?

John: When I think of the distinction between the writer and the poet, what comes to mind is the distinction between a craftsman and a prophet. Hear me out. Writing tends to have the characteristics of any trade or art. There are things to be learned, skills to be honed, and practice, practice, practice. Poetry, however, brings to mind someone with more of a spiritual bent, almost a religious figure or hermit, scribbling down things feverishly, inspired by god or madness. If these two arts were decks of cards, writing would be a sturdy, ordinary Bicycle deck, while poetry would be a Tarot deck. Make sense? I don't know. Perhaps it's just me.

As far as zombies, a poet, lost in mystical, rhapsodic thought, would be eaten. A writer, on the other hand, trying to discern the zombie's motivation, would be eaten.

Isobelle: I think there is an essential solitariness to the act of writing. Collaborations are very strange and I cannot imagine letting someone mess with my ideas. The only times I have ever managed it have been a kind of play. I could do it because in my mind it was not 'real writing'. I am also unsure whether I am a writer because sometimes I need to be alone, or writing has demanded that. Certainly as the eldest of eight children, I escaped inside my head to

think about the world, and that thinking took the form of stories. Writing is the place I go to think. So the trope of the lonely writer seems proper. Just in practical terms, you need to be freed from distractions. As for poets, they always seem to be to be concentrated versions of writers. Distilled to their essence. And since zombies are written into being, it makes sense that that we can write them out of being, either using the thin stiletto of poetry or the great sword of prose.

Lucy: *In general, I'd say poets and writers seldom conform to the prevailing ideas of what constitutes "normal" behavior and lifestyle. Often they're labeled eccentric or oddballs or even mentally ill, which provides material for the various archetypes when writers and poets are depicted in fiction.*

Because poets and writers typically work alone, they are at best considered reclusive, at worst potentially dangerous to society at large. I would guess poets fare worse in this regard. While a prose writer may produce an entertaining tale, poetry, in general, does not offer a clearcut "plot" with a discernable arc of beginning, middle, and end. This appeals to some, but hinders capsule summarizing. You can't talk up a poem to friends around the watercooler the same way you might hit the highpoints of a mainstream novel you read over the weekend.

Poetry is often pure emotion, tone, feelings. Again, this goes against the grain of what much of western society considers “useful.” I’d say this is true even more for the poet than the writer. Famous writers, though in the minority, are known to most people. Whether they’ve read them or not, they may have seen a movie or play based on something the writer wrote. Poets seldom gain widespread recognition, which can make their line of work underappreciated and misunderstood outside their own group.

As far as relating to the struggles of poets and authors in fiction, what comes first to mind is “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose protagonist—artistically inclined--supposedly suffers from “nervous depression.” Journaling is only one of many activities the woman is forbidden to indulge in, surely as vital to her mental health as time outdoors in nature and in the company of other people, which she is also denied. I can relate to Gilman’s protagonist, whose creative spirit is a source of alarm to her husband and doctors. In my teens, I wrote fiction that generally featured an animal protagonist. Human characters often ended up dead. To say the least, this wasn’t appreciated by my family of origin. Eventually, regrettably, I felt it safer to destroy all my early manuscripts.

I also think (and this is in no way intended to be sexist), that because society tends to perceive some emotions as masculine, others as feminine, that by pointing the reader toward an inner experience of emotion, it falls into the column of the feminine. Appreciating poetry, reading or reciting it, can be disparaged in some quarters, or at least undervalued. So writers and poets are each stereotyped, to their own detriment and that of a society which often doesn't appreciate them.

Now about those zombie hordes:

I think it would come down to who is the most reclusive, isolated, self-contained, and stoic, be it fiction writer or poet. If you're miles off the grid with the nearest other humans far up the road somewhere, zombies are probably going after larger population centers and places where humans huddle in groups. I'd imagine the solitary poet or writer would stand a better chance, if only because they might be overlooked. And they could capture the horror of humanity's demise with work that, should anyone survive to read it, would be a fitting elegy for humankind.

I would love to be able to make a case for the poet, but have to go with the writer, especially if we're talking about horror writers who may have already imagined countless possibilities for destroying/escaping zombies.

Actually I doubt either poets or writers would fare very well in a zombie apocalypse, although I can think of a couple of writers with survivalist skills who might make it. Creativity can be a survival skill, too, so writers/poets might find a way to fly under the radar, hole up in a bomb shelter or take refuge in an abandoned factory, sex dungeon, or lighthouse. (Not good ideas? Well, proves my point.)

On the other hand, a poet might view the zombie hordes as metaphor rather than deadly danger, a reason to change the trajectory of life on earth should life survive. He or she might face the end with equanimity and a loaded revolver, getting the hell out before joining the ranks of the undead. A creative and not too painful death might be the best solution.

Danel: *Would Poe the short story writer (and novelist of *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*) be better able to dispatch zombies than Poe the poet? I think his prose has meditated longer on mayhem to be committed by the protagonist than his poetry has: narrators doing more ominous acts to others (bricking them up and starving them, encoffining them alive, binding them beneath a razored-pendulum, stabbing, strangling, cudgeling, tarring and feathering, etc.). His poems more often feature acts done to hapless ones or are told by those who have a deep sense that they are defeated (lovers and life stolen away in “*Annabel Lee*,”*

“Lenore,” “The Conqueror Worm,” and “The Raven”). Poe the Prose Writer would handle any threat from the Undead more lethally than when he put on his Poet cape.

Maybe a trope about poets popularized in the very early British/German/American Romantic eras – that fosters the poet image you speak of -- was that they were more prone to be inspiration-struck, made madder by suddenly spoken to by angels or demons on the wind as they stood on a cliff overlooking valley or sea. At that encounter, they were driven to write their poetry. This gives to us an image of poets in paintings having a glow of epiphany. They are God’s madmen and madwomen, prophets of their Neogothic age. Somehow prose writing was seen as cooler, more rationale, and its makers not thunderstruck. Perhaps all this glorifying of inspiration—and the cult of the brilliant but doomed and dissipated poet--was part of the understandable reaction towards the Age of Enlightenment, and all those shackles that Neoclassical taste placed on poets: rhyme, order, interest in history, the elevation of old models, and an eschewing of the personal, or any overwhelming passions and unstoppable diseases.

David: Each of you have used a certain poetic lyricism in your writing. Some of the many examples include

“The curl of a boy-sized body, glittering like pennies in the afternoon sun, the sinuous sweep of a tail curled silently in the brush.”

John F.D. Taft, *What Becomes God in The End of All Beginnings* (Gray Matter Press 2014)

“In the pale light, it gleamed like something living, like the horn of some exotic beast lacquered with the moonlight spilling in through the shades.”

Lucy Taylor, *The Safety of Unknown Cities* (Overlook Connection Press 2011)

“Here and there along either side of the track, among the tangle of fire-spawned regrowth, dead and utterly blackened trees rose up like shadowy accusers.”

Isabelle Carmody, *The Rebellion: The Obernewtyn Chronicles* (Bluefire 2011)

“But the Gothic mode itself is unfixed and shuttling, flitting, peeking through the keyholes, recording, signaling its dark knowledge all the time. Between the tightly held secrets and brazen confession from traumatic times, there the Gothic exists. Its ghosts are representatives for what we cannot talk about or

show without destroying ourselves or bonds with others.”

Danel Olson, *9/11 Gothic: Decrypting Ghosts and Trauma in New York City’s Terrorism Novels* (Lexington Books 2021)

When you write lines like this, do you have a sense of their poetic nature and influence? Do you want your readers to experience a poetic moment in your prose?

John: Yes, Yes, and Yes! I think, particularly as a horror writer, it’s important to me to ease the reader into the horror by lulling them with sentences that evoke other feelings than just terror. Something beautiful that kind of transcends the horror, lets it spread its wings more fully as it were. I think that the awesome beauty of a poetic sensibility in a horror story acts counter-intuitively, like salt in something sweet. It heightens the horror, almost enshrines it in the story.

Isobelle: Poetry is like a secret weapon for a prose writer, and I think my love of poetry had whetted that weapon. I reread poetry constantly, trying to understand its secrets by experiencing them over and over. I am aware when I am using a technique or idea or approach that comes from a poem. I don’t use poetry all the time. I am often all about

story, but I default to it when I want to go deep or dark. Or when I want to say something without saying it. I don't write poetry for publication, but I use its tools to do the things that only poetry can do. I slow down and get succinct, I hint and suggest, elude or occlude, I stab or prick or cut deep.

Lucy: *When a writer writes lines like this, do you have a sense of their poetic nature and influence? Do you want your readers to experience a poetic moment in your prose? Yes, absolutely. I believe the “poetry” of certain prose can add greatly to the reader’s overall experience, especially if what’s being described has an element of the weird, the terrifying, the uncanny. It adds another dimension, especially in horror, when the reader knows going in there will be certain types of images and situations, often quite disturbing. There is a keen edge, what I experience as a frisson of pleasurable discombobulation, when a writer paints an image that is frankly horrifying, but does so in such a lyrical, melodic, perhaps even an erotic way, that the senses are momentarily at odds, trying to determine how to react. Is this sickening or exquisite? Should I find it engaging or unsettling? How can a line or passage bring forth such different reactions at the same time?*

I'd like to use a couple of examples: one of the many reasons I found Cassandra Khaw's “Nothing But Blackened Teeth” so unforgettable is that she takes a

rather ghastly situation (girls buried alive under a decayed palace where a wedding is to take place) and describes it in prose that's both poetic and shocking, elegant and off-putting. I feel the same about passages in Nathan Ballingrud's "The Butcher's Table" in which (among many other things) a callow young man is erotically captivated by the first sight of his future lover: a beautiful young woman whose exquisite frock drips with the blood of the slaughtered. It's a delicious melding of overweening desire and the horror of the circumstances in which that desire manifests.

So while I think poetic imagery enhances any writing, I especially find horror fiction imbued with the poetic to be extraordinarily powerful and moving.

Danel: *My lines are beggared by comparison to Lucy's, Isobelle's, and John's, but I will attempt an answer. I suppose the ghost metaphor is the most prevalent in all my writing. That's because ghosts are my business.*

However, what lies beneath this is poetry. Every love story is a ghost story, as Virginia Woolf told us. If you wait around long enough, in any quartet of lovers, or trio, or duo, one or more of them passes away. The love story turns into a remembrance of who someone was. But by remembering them, the ghost of that love flickers alive in the imagination.

I write that way to reflect how the invisible presses upon us, hovers, peers in. I write that way to imitate Gothic presence. I want to write the way a ghost moves. Not just any ghost. But this special one.

David: I often have heard both writers and readers of poetry that they consider it like therapy. I see that in mainstream poetry with the modern emphasis on confessional and introspective verse. Speculative poetry, whether horror or science fiction, which tend to be more narrative than introspective presents a greater task for a poet to create that therapeutic effect. Do you read poetry for therapy and have you found this in speculative poetry?

John: I think poetry can be therapeutic, almost like its cousin, music. As with going back to listen to songs I like to establish a certain mood, I do go back to old favorites like Poe, Shakespeare, and Shelley to reacquaint myself with what I felt when I first read them. Or to see how each were able to condense an image or a feeling so that I can learn.

Isobelle: :I don't much like the idea of poetry as a kind of medicine. It seems too pragmatic, and yet poetry can be a language. I remember enduring a separation with a lover in poetry – not his or mine but poetry we read. Each poem was an offering and also a message. But like music, poetry

seems more like a profound echo – when we are sad, we deliberately listen to sad music, we do not try to heal our sadness with a cheerful ditty. We are strangely comforted by the sense that the song understands us, and reflects our deepest self back to ourselves. I think therapy is about trying to stop or lessen pain, whereas poetry understands that pain is also a kind of truth. In this sense, I think there is a greater potential for speculative poetry to achieve this, even at its most narrative, if it goes deep enough, and dark poetry, by its essence, digs deep.

Lucy: *I'm sure I've used it as such—when in need of comfort, the meter and cadence of poetry can be soothing in the way of fine music. Through the way it evokes emotion, I believe poetry has an intrinsic healing power, bringing to the surface feelings the reader may not have even realized were there. I definitely seek out and appreciate poetry that soothes raw emotions by framing them in a manner I may not have previously considered or that gives solace in the way of a kind friend sharing an experience they've gone through that was similar to my own.*

As humans, I think one of our greatest fears is of feeling utterly alone, that agony of believing no one else has ever hurt like this/lived through this/survived this. In just a few lines, a poem can break through that illusion of isolation

and touch a reader's heart. That is surely a form of therapy.

As far as speculative poetry, I've read a great deal more horror than science fiction, so I will address only the former. Dark poetry, I believe, can act as a catharsis, with its sometimes over-the-top imagery, depiction of the forbidden, the rantings of madness and , and of violence and mutilation. It can elicit the amazement of recognition and an unburdening of shame—yes, I've thought of doing that or would like to experience that—one encounters ideas and images that may stir horror along with familiarity.

On a different note, I'd like to add that I find great comfort in Sufi poetry, much of which combines touches of simple quotidian life with insight into the ineffable and inexpressible (which of course is expressed quite beautifully by Sufi poets). I find such mystical poems to be truly comforting, especially in times of global catastrophes.

Danel: *It is more of an escape from who I am, like a kind of intense acting.*

Alyssa: **How do you think the abstractness and evocative nature of dark verse contributes to horror, given that prose tends to be more plot driven?**

John: *It's precisely that imprecise nature of poetry that works so well in more deliberate prose writing. Sometimes, especially in horror, I want things to be obscured, hidden. It adds to the mystery of the story and heightens the eventual payoff. But you can't be too vague or the reader will get confused or annoyed. You don't want readers to know too early but you want them to sort of know. Does that make sense? A poetical approach to this, then, helps, by occluding parts of the story through a heightened style of writing that relies heavily on poetic constructs—imagery, precise word choice, and meter, among others. It helps give something for the reader to chew on, to ponder, to marvel at while the mystery unfolds in your story.*

Isobelle: *I think poetry focuses in, and that ability to get really close produces an intensity that can carry a reader into some specific moment or event far more than a story which must tend to its chronology. With poetry, you must stop and be still and concentrate. There are not a herd of sentences and paragraphs behind, harrying you on. Dark verse can take frighteningly, facinatingly close to the horror or terror or the grotesque or estranging, and make you stand still and look at it.*

Lucy: *I believe the abstractness of poetry increases the level of horror in that it acts as an invitation to the reader's individual interpretation. A kind of Rorschach pattern in*

verse, if you will. If I'm terrified of dark doorways because X might lurk behind them, then it's likely that's what I'll envision when I metaphorically open the dark doorway in the poem. We see what we're looking for. That can apply just as well to poetry as to an image.

With much of prose writing, the story unfolds in neatly aligned paragraphs that move toward a final chapter where the plot is "wrapped up" to the reader's satisfaction. Poetry offers no such security, but leaves much more to the reader, who may find the imagery more terrifying if it reflects back their own darkest fantasies or fears. And since poetry is often enigmatic and open to a multiplicity of interpretations, it lends itself to the possibility of paranoia, a kind of mind-trap where everyone's interpretation is personal and private, yet each feels as though the poem exposes their secrets to the light of day, a state of affairs just as likely to be horrifying as liberating.

There's also the use of literary devices in dark poetry, which can increase the sense of horror much like a distant, ominous soundtrack in a movie might do. In "The Raven," Poe uses cadence to speed up or slow down the tone of the poem. His use of alliteration and consonance gives a sense of foreboding, of the inextricable approach of something terrible, culminating in the ominous refrain of "Nevermore." In prose form, I don't believe the tale of

“The Raven” would inspire the same sense of dread and grief.

Danel: *Obviously there can be exceptions to this idea: Lovecraft, for example, can be as nebulous in his prose as his poetry. But among literary genres, poetry is the most oneiric for me. It often has a way of amplifying mystery by dropping us into a home, a street, a time, a bed, a dream, a dungeon, an assault, a fantasy, a nightmare. There’s been no prepping for this journey by us, the Nav Feature seems unavailable presently, and there’s no routing directions home from this twilight zone. Poetry has such immediacy by a shrewd limiting of our familiarization with the place, the experience, the history, or the speaker for much of its content. It may not give back-story as a novella might typically present, and avoids offering ample time to judge the reliability of the narrator; it will not slowly show how a personality has formed as a novel could; it demurs at even showing someone driving us to a remote inn as a short story could.*

Instead, we often have no bearings for at least the first half of a poem. We are just there. And all our senses are aroused. For intense horror poetry of the most triggering kind, we may move forward in a hyper-alert fashion, especially if it is read aloud by a voice that troubles something within us. Our stress indicators rise and we feel

the rush. Breathing is faster, pulse quicker; adrenaline is releasing, and heartbeats quickening.

You will be detained to Rwanda until your case..., an unknown voice might start to command in a poem.

How do you plead to the charge of first-degree murder of the twins? ..., a judge, who is also your mother, asks in form of verse.

All who love you are gone too, except for me, your last ami... sing-songs a bald man who proffers his business card with the raised glistening lettering, "Horror Isle Timeshares."

David: Are there contemporary speculative poets you consider your favorites? What is it about their work that earned your approval?

John: I have to say that I don't read as much poetry these days as I should. There are so many great speculative poets these days, it's an embarrassment of riches. But I've read Linda Addison, Stephanie M. Wytovich, Marge Simon, and you, David. As with all great poetry it's how these writers condense the feelings and images they're conveying into something that's readily relatable in such a short form that attracts me.

***Isobelle:** I love Ann K Schwader's *Driving into Snow*, and I think Marge Simon is a fine writer. Her *Sparrow* seems very apt in a world where we seem once more to be approaching the darkness of war. The marvellous collection, *The Stars Like Sand*, edited by Australian poet Penelope Cottier and New Zealand Writer Tim Jones has some gems in it. There is a wonderful laconic poem by Les Murray in it, called *The Future*, also poems by two of my favourite poets, Judith Beveridge and Dorothy Porter. Though the latter are not specifically darkly speculative poets. It is a really interesting collection because it is divided into sections inspired by older poems. Ironically, one section is inspired by one of those nationalistic white male poets I disliked so as a girl. I also like the work of Silvia Cantón Rondoni who is a poet I met last year in Canberra, and of course, David, whose poetry is lush and darkly deep but also sharp, especially when it slices into madness.*

***Lucy:** This one is tough. There are so many poets whose work I adore, but a few that come to mind are:*

“Satan's Sweethearts” by Marge Simon and Mary Turzillo, a collection of macabre poetry that explores historically lethal women like Delphine LaLaurie and Ching-Shih. I love how this collection subverts the trope of the delicate and harmless female.

“A Collection of Nightmares” and “A Collection of Dreamscapes” by Christina Sng, whose relentless visions and fables scald the mind. These poems kept me awake at night, afraid of what dreams might be spun from them. David E. Cowen’s dark and twisted “Bleeding Saffron” and “The Madness of Empty Spaces” left scars in their wake and a chilling awareness of the darkness inside my own mind.

I love strange and beautiful surprises and the blackout poetry of Jessica McHugh’s “A Complex Accident of Life” introduced me to a whole new dimension of wordsmithery. Her poems dazzle the eye and make me hungry to read more.

Alessandro Manzetti’s “White Chapel Rhapsody” pays macabre homage to Jack the Ripper while “Dancing with Maria’s Ghost” invites the reader into the hellish mindscape of erotic obsession. By turns ferocious and sublime, poetry that’s a delicious walk along the edge of the blade.

Finally, I have to single out Stephanie Wytovich, whose poems “Surgical Fantasies of the Past Ten Years” and “Emergency Masturbation Fantasy” are so intimately harrowing I found them painful to read. But wonderful and begging to be read again! (I guess that summarizes my love of dark poetry.)

Danel: I was reading some of the memorable poems from Marge Simon & Mury Turzillo's Victims (Weasel, 2021) lately, along with some fine ones from Christina Sng, Angelo Yriko Smith, Lee Murray, & Geneve Flynn in Tortured Willows (Yuriko, 2021). Sara Tantlinger is a favorite, too: see Cradleland of Parasites (Rooster Republic Press, 2020). Mari-Carmen Marin's Swimming Not Drowning (Legacy Book Press, 2021) features fresh ways of looking at old enemies: Fear (of death, of depression) is a kidnapper who ties one's nerves with electric wires in one of her poems from that collection.

I became some of the people in those poems, laid down my burdens and took up theirs (which were heavier).

David: Given your love of poetry what appears to make you hesitant to write it and even publish your own poetry?

John: Hah. I haven't written poetry since I was in college, and there persists a certain whiff of pretentiousness when I think about writing it these days. Poetry, more so than prose, seems to demand a reason for writing it. It requires me to have something deeply felt to say. When I was young and deeply passionate about things, it felt natural. Now, older and more, I dunno, sedate, it kind of makes me embarrassed. That's probably just me. I wrote a poem for my wife on our wedding day, and I think I had something

published in an HWA poetry thing a few years back. But for me, what holds me back more than anything is that feeling of “I’m not worthy.”

Isobelle: *Well, I have published a grand sum total of two poems in my life. One about the pandemic called The Chickens of the Apocalypse, and one called Bone Juggling, which Jan worked on for me, showing me the sleight of word that turns a good idea and a few lines into a poem. I have a whole lot of poems I have written and lost in the paper trail of my life, since Paris, some of which I miss, and hope to meet again in the future. But part of loving poetry is that it is for me, not for the world. And to come back to the beginning, I write poetry in order to understand poetry better and for the pleasure of doing it, which only needs an audience of one – me.*

Lucy: *I had to think about this. I did write poetry as a teenager, because the emotions were so intense and visceral I had to get them down at once on paper, without taking time to construct a story. I needed to express my despair immediately, almost a regurgitation of pain.*

So why did I stop writing poetry and never again took it up?

I’m not sure. In part, I think it’s because when an idea inspires me strongly enough to start writing, it invariably

begins with a person or situation I want to explore through dialogue, conflict, and a spacious narrative. I dive in without considering how the idea might work as a poem.

But am I so wedded to inventing a storyline and characters that I fear to spill words unconstrained? Are emotions manageable for me only when they come camouflaged in outlines and backstories? Fear, of course, is a factor. There's confidence that comes from having written prose for so many years, a familiarity that turns my mind down a path with which I have experience and have enjoyed some success. I have no such assurance as far as poetry, and then I ask myself: why does this matter? It doesn't. So perhaps I do want write poetry. Because, for me, words are indeed therapy. And exploring darkness is sometimes the first step toward the light.

Danel: *The hesitation is on the hourglass. I can choose to take time interpreting art, film, poems--or making art, film, poems. Only a few people seem to do both, and my admiration for them is total.*

My instinct is to understand how things work and how other minds besides mine function, love, and hate. That may be because other minds are more intriguing and layered and less predictable than my own.

The other explanation may be more contestable. I believe that much poetry is inspired by trauma: if you fully examine a poet, you will find many unhealed wounds on their flesh and soul.

Poets may disagree.

Still, from talking with poets and reading their commentaries, I see that much verse often comes from unprocessed experiences that I have been so far fortunate not to endure, and it is transformed in their verse. Such harm to the poets or their families includes extreme poverty, civil war and refugee displacement, physical or emotional abandonment/abuse by caregiver, clinical depression, repeated suicidal ideation, manipulation or betrayal by partner, loss of children, sexism, racism, agism, religious persecution, sexual harrassment, rape, and assault or attempted murder.

If you hear a scream in the night, it is not like you hear it for three hours. It may be twelve seconds only. But that makes it unforgettable. It is sudden and spontaneous and overflowing and contagious . . . just like those residents' wails in any locked down city in the past or present—like Wuhan, Shanghai, or the one I taught in Qufu, China. That sound is from a person short of food or human touch, or one who has lost a beloved pet and last joy, or one whose children are taken away to a quarantine-hospital without

family by their side. That cry searches for us as a poem does.

The cri de coeur is the source of meaningful poetry. When we hear it, we recognize it as primally as a wolf in a pack joins a howl. We open our windows and cry out into the night too.

BIOS:

JOHN F.D. TAFF is the multiple Bram Stoker Award-nominated author of *The End in All Beginnings* and *The Fearing*. His short stories and novellas have appeared in innumerable magazines and anthologies over the last thirty years. Peter Straub once tweeted that he was “mighty cool,” which Taff will undoubtedly have engraved on his tombstone. Taff’s recent work can be seen in *The Bad Book*, the anthology he edited for Bleeding Edge Books, and *Dark Stars* from Tor/Nightfire, the anthology he edited and contributed to. His work has also appeared in anthologies such as *Gutted*, *Behold*, *Shadows Over Main Street 2*, *Garden of Fiends* and *Lullabies for Suffering*. New work will appear soon in *Orphans of Bliss*, *The Hideous Book of Hidden Horrors*, and *Human Monsters*. You can follow Taff on Twitter @johnfdtaff.

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Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature in the 2001 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Both *Little Fur* and *A Fox Called Sorrow* received BAAFTA Industry Awards for design. *Alyzon Whitestarr* won the coveted Golden Aurealis for overall best novel at the Aurealis Awards. *The Red Wind* which she wrote and illustrated, won Book of the Year in the CBC awards, in the Younger readers category. Earlier this year she completed her PhD at the University of Queensland and her most recent novel is the final book in the Kingdom of the Lost series, *The Velvet City*. She completed her PhD in 2021 and is currently a Research Fellow at The University of Queensland with the Creativity and Human Flourishing Project. She is currently working on an adult novel called *The Theatre of Death*. <https://isobellecarmody.net.au/>.

Danel Olson has taught in Palestine, Canada, China, and America on argument, literature, and film. Three-time finalist for the Bram Stoker Award and winner of a Shirley Jackson Award and two World Fantasy Awards, his published work has been named "a major contribution to film history and scholarship" by the Washington Post. His most recent volume is Lexington Books' 9/11 Gothic: Decrypting Ghosts and Trauma in New York City's Terrorism Fiction, based on his PhD from the University of

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