

12-1-2009

There Are Other Worlds than These

Jessica L. Nettles

Kennesaw State University, elfqueen@bellsouth.net

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nettles, Jessica L., "There Are Other Worlds than These" (2009). *Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects*. Paper 58.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University.

There Are Other Worlds than These

By

Jessica L. Nettles

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional
Writing in the Department of English
In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw
State University Kennesaw, Georgia 2009

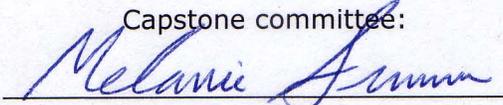
College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Jessica Nettles

Has been approved by the committee
For the capstone requirement for the Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English
At the December 2009 graduation

Capstone committee:


Member


Member

“Go, then. There are other worlds than these.”
Jake Chambers
From *The Gunslinger*

Table of Contents

There Are Other Worlds than These	3
Ka-Tet (Acknowledgements)	12
Goodbye, Hello	15
Summoning	28
Scared of Dark	38
Ouija	50

There Are Other Worlds than These

Beginnings

My childhood was spent growing up in a small suburb of Atlanta, which sounds almost like a complacent, late 20th century way of saying that my childhood was nothing special and contained nothing special. It's a nice veneer for what my home life was like.

At my house the spiritual and mundane mixed to create a reality that was a little off-center, even for the 1970s. From a very early age, I was exposed to the supernatural. My memory is filled with snapshots of my parents playing with the Ouija board, and sound bites of relatives telling stories of speaking with dead relatives. This is all mixed with a Southern Baptist upbringing. I was sure that there were other worlds, but I was also sure that believing this was going to send me to hell (which is another world too, when you think of it). This duality of belief makes me marvel that I grew up sane at all. In a way I was living the duality of Flannery O'Connor's South. Our exterior landscape is one of modern glass edges tempered by the curves and rounds of the old plantation houses. Our interior landscape is populated by the sharp education that many of us have gained through some of the finest universities in the South, and those things we've heard all our lives and know are true because of tradition. We have a generational surety that the stories passed to us by previous generations hold some level of truth that cannot be ignored. Ghosts, spirits, and spirituality are all inbred into the young Southerner's soul. How can they not be? Our parents, grandparents, friends, and even the Bible tell us so.

When I was in middle school, I began reading authors like Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Edgar Allan Poe, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Other voices from other places agreed with what my upbringing had tempered me to believe so easily. Soon, I also began writing. So, what does an eleven-year-old who has been exposed to ghosts, aliens, sentient robots, and hobbits write about? Other realities, of course! I balanced this by writing sappy, spiritual poetry for my church. I think I was trying to assuage my feeling that my writing was not completely of God.

What I don't think I really grasped till much later was that the church experience, even the more conservative experience, sets a person up for seeing other worlds than the one we inhabit. Our songs tell of a place where life will be perfect and we'll all be in harmony with each other and God. This place is sparkling, golden, and pure—not anything like our cities in this world. Our stories tell of men talking directly to God, fighting side-by-side with angels, and participating in miracles. Our ministers tell us that faith is based on things that are not seen. By definition, we believe in other worlds than these.

Journey

From the time I was eleven, I knew that my life was going to be about words and writing. When I was in sixth grade, the journey looked easy. I'd write, people would love my writing, and poof—success and money would follow. One author who was skyrocketing when my dream was born was Stephen King. The man seemed to churn out huge books like a regular story factory. It would be years before I would sit down and read his writing memoir *On Writing*. It would also be

years of a lot of detours before I understood that writing wasn't a magical solution, just another path to where I would end up going.

I started to college my second time in 1997 at the age of thirty. For the ten years previous, I lived the whole dream deferred scenario. I married at age 19, just into my junior year at Kennesaw State College, and allowed my then husband to go to school and finish his degree work. He received a Master's in theology, while I got to find out what it's like to live alone in places where I knew next to nobody. I also put my writing on the shelf, allowing him to convince me that my writing wasn't special and my dream was better left deferred to another time and place. After the divorce, it was clear that my dream needed to be taken off the shelf. I had two toddlers to feed and clothe, and getting a degree, any degree, was going to help me do that. My parents also demanded this degree as part of the terms for my tiny family to move back in with them. I applied and was accepted at Kennesaw State as junior.

To say I was thrilled was an understatement. That fall I attended classes with students almost half my age. My days were long. I was up by 4:30 am to open the local Starbucks. Days not spent serving coffee to a grateful public were spent with my children, or in classes where I devoured all sorts of literature, and became inspired enough to start dancing the dance of the writer again. Nights were devoted to writing, studying, and earning a 3.45 average. Not enough for that Cum Laude I craved, but close enough to be proud of my accomplishment. In 2002, I earned a Bachelor's of Art in English. For this effort, the tiny company I worked for gifted me with a twenty-five cent raise.

My writing was acclaimed in some circles. Two of my stories were published in a local publisher's anthology called *O Georgia*, which was exciting, but did not fill my pockets in any way. I became discouraged because I had this degree and was still barely making nine dollars an hour being a girl Friday. I tried sending my stories to various publishers. The rejections fell like rain. It wasn't long before my dad started asking what was next. It became clear that if I was going to write, I needed to find my focus and my community.

In 2004, I enrolled in the MAPW at Kennesaw State University. By this time, I'd begun teaching English at the local technical college. Things seemed to happen all at once—I was given a full-time position at Chattahoochee Technical College, and I started my degree work at KSU. I had a plan, or so I thought. I would earn my MAPW with a composition/rhetoric focus, which would help me learn to be a teacher. My creative writing would be a secondary track, and I would pursue it lightly. The reasoning was that my writing couldn't be counted on to make consistent money, but the teaching could. During this time I discovered something. I loved the teaching almost as much as I loved the writing. I also learned that I loved the creative writing classes more than I loved the composition/rhetoric classes. Before long, I discovered that I'd taken more creative classes than comp/rhet classes, and shifted my major to creative writing.

I read Stephen King's *On Writing* in 2004 for Dr. Susan Hunter in Issues and Research. I'd never been a huge fan of his books previous to reading his memoir. What really struck me was how much King was like me as a writer. We had the same anxieties, similar approaches to storytelling, and we both were interested in

exploring other worlds and inner frights. After reading *On Writing*, I went on to read *The Stand* (mostly because I wanted to see the creative process he discusses in *On Writing* in his fiction), and then, a few years later, his *Dark Tower* series. This was a bit of a turn for me because I'd never been a horror fan prior to this excursion. I learned that I could never be as gross and nasty as he could, but I could be smart and continue to listen to my characters and follow my holistic approach to writing. I also learned that by doing these things my characters would show me things that led to those other world sort of experiences.

During this time I also learned that I loved writing comedy as much as I loved stories. What became clear, however, as time moved closer the end of my time at KSU, is that no matter if I wrote comedy plays, short stories, or even book proposals my interest always seemed to sway back to ghosts, the afterlife, and crossing between here and the afterlife. When I considered what I wanted to do for my final project, I looked back over the body of work I'd crafted in my time in MAPW and saw that my eyes were focused on the same things as always—death and the afterlife. Ghost stories are all around us, especially here in the South, but I didn't just want to revisit old stories. I wanted to tell stories that had never been told before. Stories about and from other worlds than these.

The Way Station

In January, I had planned to have at least half of my work done before the new semester began, but the holidays came and went faster than I expected. The work started slowly, but I managed to write a draft or two of "Goodbye, Hello" and send it in. Then in February, the world turned upside down. My ex-husband passed

suddenly from complications caused by undiagnosed diabetes. My writing stopped. I could say that I stopped because I was busy with tending to my children's affairs, or that I was focused on preparing for his funeral, but the truth of the matter is that all the voices in my head went completely silent. I had to stop everything for this confused sort of grief/rage/numbness that set into my mind over the next few months. April came, and I had nothing except guilt because I wasn't ready. Dr. Melanie Sumner was pivotal in supporting me when I asked her to allow me to try to finish this work in fall quarter. Sometimes waiting at the way station can be a useful thing to have to do.

Drawing of the Three

After spending the spring waiting and feeling guilty about my "failure," I decided to do what most spiritual people do. I asked my friends, family, and anyone else I knew would do so to pray for me. I asked that people pray that I be led to things that would help me move out of the way station to a more creative place. One of my old high school classmates, Lisa Cheater, sent me a message within a few days of this prayer request. Lisa recommended a book called *Zen in the Art of Writing* by Ray Bradbury. He had been one of the first science fiction writers I'd ever read, and is still one of my favorite writers.

What was wonderful about this book was that it wasn't a "how-to-write-a-great-story-using-my-formula" kind of writing book. It was a book about creativity and the root of stories in the writer's soul. He told a lot of stories about his own experiences and the origins of some of his most famous works. One of the things that really made the difference for me was how he emphasized the importance of

mining your childhood fears for stories. I began to look back at the things I feared as a child. These were things I'd not thought about in years. There were the usual monsters in the closet, my parents' Ouija board, and death. Other things cropped up as well that weren't childhood fears, but things in my childhood and into my adult life that were important, like the Bible and my faith.

Over the course of seven days, I wrote three of the four stories that are a part of this project. I drew one from my childhood, one from the Bible, and one from my daughter. It was one of the biggest adrenaline rushes of my life. I was so excited that I sent them to my crew of trusted readers, and did a couple of drafts in preparation for the fall. I then read a couple of the stories in front of fellow writers as part of the Write Room's Play Pen project in the early fall. These readings were vital to understanding what was working and what needed changing immediately. After Dr. Sumner read over my work, she made comments, and I continued to polish the stories, which were already starting to feel like they were meant to be together as a set.

The Oracle and the Mountains

When I first started this project, I wasn't sure exactly how I was going to complete it. The largest work I had to that point was a play, and it was forty-five pages long. I checked out some blue-bound, completed MAPW capstone projects to see what my former classmates had done. They seemed huge and a little intimidating. I knew these people and I knew what kind of work they produced. It is never a good idea for one writer to find him or herself comparing his or her work to a contemporary's work. In those early days, it was Dr. Sumner who was my oracle.

She told me that I could do this, and I could have fun doing this. It took a little struggle and a lot of prayer, but I discovered she was right. I learned that I was capable of writing stories that were strong and interesting. These stories took me to other worlds and I was able to share what I discovered with my audience. My writing allowed me to embrace the strange, sometimes magical, sometimes frightening parts of my childhood, and maybe even make sense of those things.

Being a part of the MAPW program here at Kennesaw State has brought me to the creative mountain and shown me that I will not find a wise old guru who will give me all the answers to be a successful writer. It has shown me that I am my own guru, and that all that creativity and fire is inside me waiting to be mined and shared with other people. It has also shown me that becoming a famous best-selling author isn't nearly as important as the people that you meet through your creative work and the experiences you can have through your creativity. My voice is not a lone voice but one of many in a close community of others like myself.

Ka-Tet

(Acknowledgements)

A ka-tet, according to Stephen King, is a group of people drawn together by a sort of fate or spiritual force (ka) to work toward a similar goal. So many people have been drawn to me by this project, and I want to make sure to thank them.

First, I want to thank Dr. Melanie Sumner for being a wonderful, patient advisor. She led me through my moments of doubt and fear over the last six months of this project. I am especially happy for her strong suggestions for “Ouija.” They made the story stronger than it was in the first two or three drafts. She also was a big help in getting me moving after my “way station” experience in the spring.

I also would like to thank Don and Yvonne Nettles, my parents, for continually asking me how close I was to finishing, and for providing funding for this last semester of work. Without them, I’d still be waiting to graduate.

My core ka-tet are my trusted readers: Steve Wood, Jonathan Horne, Melissa Davis, Crystal Marrs, and my daughter Gina Juhan. Steve: Thanks for your emotional and editorial comments. It is a thrill to know that I scared you. Jonathan: Your close reading and literary observations made it easy to make decisions about the structure and value of my stories. You are a beautiful soul. Melissa and Crystal: both of you are like sisters to me. The kind of sisters that will tell me the truth when something stinks. Thanks for your excellent comments early in the project. Gina: Thank you for telling me when to crank up the scare factor, even when I didn’t know exactly how to do that. I also thank you for allowing me to fictionalize you. I know

you think you sound stupid in “Scared of the Dark,” but I assure you that you never sound stupid in my mind. I love you.

My son, Stuart Juhan, is also a part of this. In those times when I just couldn't write he was by my side with hugs, hot cocoa, and words of great encouragement. I'm not sure he always really understands his crazy, creative mother, but he manages to know exactly when to dispense love and kindness. Stuart: I want you to know I plan to keep my promise not to go back to school till you're in college. Love you!

Amanda Canup, my best friend, kept me from turning away from this project. There were moments when I didn't think I could complete the journey because I wasn't ready or didn't have the necessary strength to move past the wall of writer's block in the spring. She kept telling me that I could do anything I put my mind to. When no one else could encourage me, she could (and can). Like we always say—that's what friends do. Thanks!

So many MAPW friends have supported me during this time as well:

- Willena Moye: My Capstone partner-in-crime. There were so many times your phone calls and questions, as well as the beer made the writing go better. Hooray! We finally can graduate!
- Chrysta Lea Baker: Thanks so much for the encouragement through Facebook. You'll never know how much it helped when you'd remind me to relax and let the work happen.
- Gina-Gareri Watkins: Your encouragement during my readings at the Play Pen events has been so great. Can't wait till the graduation party!

- Joellen Kubiak Woodall: Thank you for allowing me to read my work at the Play Pen this fall. You reminded me why community is so important to a writer. I'll see you at Gina's party!

Let me also extend my thanks to Mr. Stephen King and Mr. Ray Bradbury.

Both of you have expanded my abilities to tell the stories that spring from deep inside myself and not fear the consequences. "May we meet again on the path, before we all meet in the clearing." (King)

Goodbye, Hello:

When Death Comes at Truly Inconvenient Moments

It was 5:30 one winter morning and my radio-alarm went off. As I lay in a half-conscious state, Scott Slade on WSB read the news in that quiet voice reporters seem to use prior to 6 am. He told a story about a man driving his wife to the hospital on icy roads the night before. They slid off the road into some woods. Several hours later, the car was found and mother and baby were just fine. Dad, however, was dead. The woman told the paramedics how a mysterious man had found them, helped her give birth to her new baby son, and then disappeared. No one else saw the man, but apparently someone had also called 911.

I was fascinated with this story, but dismayed later that day when I did a search on the computer and could not find evidence anywhere of this news story. Did I dream this story? I wasn't sure, but I loved the idea so much I wrote it on a yellow post-it-note and kept it on my desk for almost a year. As it rested, a twist on this story took form.

When I took Dr. Aaron Levy's playwriting class, he asked us to write five monologues. This story began to, no pun intended, haunt me. I wrote several monologues involving women, but this monologue was a man's voice. I began to realize that the dead father wanted to tell his tale. In this way, the story took form.

Monologues for stage are a lot different from short stories. In a stage monologue, the voice, the actor's movements, and sometimes the setting (though this monologue had no setting per se) help the audience understand and follow the

nuances of what is being presented. Short story is a bit more involved in that the writer has to establish characters, setting, and tone with words rather than visual and aural cues. The actual writing of the short story began in the winter, so I started by visualizing the roads I take everyday around my house, and how they are when they ice over. Before long I had a route, and plenty of scenery. Then the characters came and filled the car with life, death, and dialogue (some taken from the monologue). Suddenly the skeleton was fleshing out into a body and a person. The story built itself.

I never have been sure if the basis of this tale was real or just a dream that I had before waking on that winter morning five years ago, but either way, I feel like it was a gift.

Goodbye, Hello

Michael sped down Lost Mountain Road in his tiny '77 Corolla as sleet bounced off the windshield. "Sweetie, remember you need to breathe," he said, trying not to panic.

"I—AM—BREA—THING!" his wife roared as she grabbed his seat from behind and shook it.

This caused him to swerve, briefly, into the oncoming lane. Thankfully, there were no cars coming at the moment, and there was no ice on this part of the road yet.

"Ok. Shaking my seat is not such a good plan, Robin."

She started crying large sobs of pain and drama. Then she stopped herself and said, "Sorry, Michael, you're being so great."

Midway Road loomed on the left. If Michael had been thinking, he would have headed for Dallas Highway straight from Lost Mountain. It was the logical choice, and if her labor had happened when planned, that is exactly the direction he would have gone. Neither of them planned for the panic that ensued when her water broke at the children's home where they worked. Michael made the turn into the darkness. The trees seemed to lean in closer than usual as they went down the first hill.

Robin's cries waned for a moment or two, which was a good thing. The road was slick, and the curves were deep. Michael needed to focus. He made the first few turns, and, somehow, made it to the four-way stop at the top of the first major hill. The road gleamed with newly formed ice. As he looked up at the pine trees

surrounding the intersection, he could see their silvery tops bowing toward them and the equally silvery wires.

He looked back at Robin. Her soft brown hair fell around her face, which was covered in sweat despite the frigidness of the outside. She was breathing like she'd run a half-marathon, but her face was relaxed and almost peaceful. He reached out his hand, and she grabbed it. Her green eye opened as her grip tightened.

"I love you, babe, but you better drive," she said.

He had to pull away as her grip tightened with her face. Another wave of pain was coming. He turned left and continued back into the darkness.

Michael knew this road almost as well as he knew his wife. He had traversed this way many times, and knew the curves fairly well. The road was like a mountain road and seemed to have a life of its own. As long as you respected the road, it would treat you well, even in the dark. Ice, however, changed that relationship. As he hit the curve by the big barn, he could feel the Corrolla's back end slide. Robin screamed. Everything happened so fast. First, they were on the road, and then, the car seemed to pirouette on the ice. It then slid down the embankment as Michael sat inside and observed. The car seemed to move faster than time outside, so while they were moving fast, he watched as the big oak tree they were sliding toward slowly made contact with the exterior of his car. He felt the side of the car crinkle and crunch into his side, bending him in a way that was new and amazing. Then there was a deeper darkness.

They'd found out about the baby fairly early into the pregnancy. It was their first, and much to Michael's surprise, he was overjoyed with the coming of a child.

He knew that it would be no picnic, and that money was tight, but that was beyond the point. The point was that they were going to have a child together.

After they found out, life went at light speed. They had to make sure everything was just right. Robin gave up coffee and junk food, and Michael did the same. They baby-proofed their condo, and repainted the spare room which would be the nursery. There were also the doctor visits, and while Michael didn't get to go to all of them, he became especially excited when he found that he would have a chance to go to see her sonogram—in 4D even! He'd been told that this was the best part of the pregnancy, and certainly didn't want to miss it.

At first, the picture looked foggy. Before the sonogram, when he said to friends, "We're going to have a baby," the statement sort of had a dream-like, airy quality, just like the fog in the picture on the tiny screen. Then out of the fog came a sharp movement, followed by a shape moving across the screen. Robin's stomach jumped about the same time, and they got an up close look at a tiny, five-toed foot. The foot slid out of the way. There was more gentle movement, almost like the baby was going to swim away, and then, they realized that the baby had rolled over, as if it knew they were trying to look. A thumb rose to the serene, but slightly inhuman face of the growing fetus.

"An alien. My wife is giving birth to an alien?" he said, half-joking. The kid did look kind of strange at first.

"He has your nose, wise-guy," Robin said, grinning.

“Poor kid. How do you know the baby is a...” he started to ask. Then the baby rolled almost backwards. The cord slid away. It was as if he wanted them to have no doubts.

“Holy cow! It *is* a boy!” said Michael, choking on his laughter.

“He really is his father’s son,” laughed Robin.

A glow like no other rose inside Michael’s heart. They were going to have a boy, and he was magnificent. He poked Robin’s stomach, and the baby poked back.

“Hey, Mikey, my man,” he whispered.

“OH GOD! HE’S COMING! AGGHHHH!” Michael opened his eyes, wondering how long he’d been out. The side of his head hurt where it’d hit the window, and he felt rather light.

My baby is coming and we’re stuck in this car. Michael thought as he turned to help his wife. “Hold on, darlin’. I’m right here,” he said. Something felt as though it was tugging at him from the inside, like he needed to go somewhere, but he couldn’t understand why he needed to go anywhere. Robin and the baby were all that mattered. The tugging subsided as he scrambled for his cell phone.

Gotta call 911. He thought.

She stared straight through him at first, and then said, “I gotta find my cell phone. Oooohhh...”

“Robin, I got it right here, you just don’t worry,” he said as she went into another contraction.

He found his cell phone, and the light illumined the small area of the car’s interior as he made his call.

"911, what is the nature of your emergency?" asked the female voice on the other end of the call.

"We slid off Midway Road into a ditch. My wife is having a..." Michael started.

"ahhh-ahhh-AHHHHHHHH," wailed Robin.

"Hello? Is anyone there? Who's that screaming?" said the voice, becoming a bit more concerned.

"My name is Michael Sarton. My wife and I are in a car...she is having a baby..." he replied slowly, so the woman could understand him.

"Michael...Michael...wake up! OH GOD, HELP ME!" cried Robin, her eyes were widened in panic.

"I'm awake; I'm right here, Robin. Right here!" said Michael, grabbing her hand.

"I'm calling the police and the EMTs. We will use the phone to triangulate your location, ma'am," stated the operator, following procedure.

"LISTEN TO ME!" He yelled, and then, as he realized she couldn't hear him at all, he flung the phone to the floor.

"Ma'am? Hello? Can you hear me?" he asked as he climbed in the back seat with his wife. Her eyes locked on him.

"Thank God! You're here! AHHHHHHH!"

Michael removed her pants and the baby was crowning. It was just like the movies they'd watched; only this time it was his wife and his baby. He threw the phone down, and focused on Robin.

“Ok, honey. You gotta push now. The worst part is over. You just gotta push,” he whispered.

“It HURRTSS,” she said through her gritted teeth.

“Remember that movie? Put your chin down and push...ok?” he encouraged her. Despite his fears, he felt incredibly calm.

She grabbed his hands, and leaned her chin to her chest. At first, there was nothing, and then he saw a first glimpse of the baby’s face. Tears started down his face.

“We’re almost there...we’re almost there...PUSH!” he said, allowing her to crush his hands with hers.

“GrrrrrRRRRRRRRRR,” she said as she once again pushed harder than she ever had. First one arm then the other and then the rest of the tiny little boy’s body rushed from her body. He was so messy and so beautiful. Michael just sat there for a minute while his wife breathed in relief, and the baby gasped for his first breath. Taking off his jacket, he wrapped the boy up, shivering himself. Robin looked at Michael, and said, “Thank you.” Michael grinned.

“It’s a son!” he replied, weak in the heart as he looked down on Mikey. The tiny infant cried loudly, greeting the world and his parents.

Robin looked to the front seat. “Michael? Michael?”

“Honey, I’m right here with the baby,” he said.

She kept looking at the driver’s seat. “Michael?” Then she started crying. He held up the baby, and yelled, “It’s a boy! Mikey! We’ve been waiting for him! LOOK AT US! LOOK AT ME!”

Robin, looking confused for a moment, as though she heard something, passed out. The baby turned his face up, and stopped crying. He looked directly at Michael. The feeling of lightness increased suddenly inside of Michael. The tugging came back full force. He suddenly wanted to go somewhere that was not here. Why did he feel the need to be anywhere? He was with the two most important people in his life, and he was being pulled somewhere without them.

Mikey looked directly into Michael's eyes, and then reached up and grabbed Michael's thumb with his whole hand with a strong, certain tug. The world stopped, and all that was important was the understanding between them.

He knows...he knows who I am

A voice inside him said simply, "You will always be with me, Dad."

Of course, I will, Mikey. We'll be friends for a long time, little guy.

The world became fuzzy and confusing both inside Michael's head, and outside his car.

Above them, Michael heard the sound of sirens converging on their area. He was glad that they'd been found, even if that 911 operator was of very little help herself. As the tugging became more intense, Mikey became almost too heavy to hold. He nestled Mikey in Robin's arms and put his coat over both of them. As cold as it had been when they started this journey, Michael was now quite comfortable.

From a distance, he heard one of them say, "Hey, I see the car. We've found it, people!" An officer and two EMTs made their way cautiously down toward the car, flashlights leading their path.

Robin came to, and began to scream loudly when the silver streams of light fell from the edge of the embankment down on the car.

“Help me! I just had a baby,” she yelled.

“Robin, I’m right here with the baby. Right here, darlin’,” he said, more to reassure himself than her.

“Please help me! I have a new baby!” she cried out as one officer came to the window.

One of the EMTs pulled open the back passenger-side door, and leaned in for a look. She saw Robin first.

“Ma’am, help is on the way. You just relax, every thing is going to be fine,” the EMT whispered. Her face was pretty and full of concern and comfort.

“My wife just had the most beautiful baby in the world!” said Michael, pointing at Mikey.

The baby started crying, and so did Robin.

“What’s your baby’s name, sweetie?” asked the pretty EMT.

Robin caught her breath, and said, “Mikey...Michael...oh God, is my husband ok?”

The pretty EMT looked at her partner, who was also a woman. She had long hair, and light blue eyes. “Hey, Elaine, meet Mikey and his mom...” She looked again at Robin.

“Robin...is my husband ok?” she asked.

Michael looked first at Kristen and Elaine, and then at his wife. Were they both crazy? He was right there.

Elaine entered the front passenger door. A look passed between the two. Elaine said, "Let's worry about getting you and the baby up to the ambulance first. I bet you two are cold."

"Robin, did you deliver this baby down here? Alone?" she asked as she began to take Robin's blood pressure.

Robin looked at Kristen, as she checked her for injuries, and said, "There was a man..."

Kristen looked up, and responded, "A man?"

Robin looked at her strangely, as if half-remembering something important. "There was a man, and he helped me through the whole thing. Then he was gone, just gone..."

Michael was floored. A MAN? What happened to "my husband?" This was just mad. No one seemed to see him but Mikey, and now his wife said that some strange man helped her deliver. *Why couldn't she see him?*

"Who was the driver, Robin?" Kristen asked carefully.

Was? What does she mean "was?"

Robin's own eyes widened, and then tears began to flow. "Oh no...oh no...it was Michael...it was my husband..."

Kristen took her hand. "Robin, you and your baby are going to go up now. We'll take care of Michael, ok?"

"Hello, I'm fine!" he said.

They quickly moved Robin and Mikey out of the tiny car. As two other EMTs carried his family to safety, Michael found himself standing with Kristen and Elaine.

"We're gonna need a bag down here," said Kristen.

A bag? What do they need a bag for?

"I wonder how they're going to tell her that her husband didn't make it," mused Elaine.

"NO! I'M RIGHT..." Michael started, but then started notice that pulling he'd felt earlier. The world started fading, and he felt like he was rising off the ground. His eyes widened with a sense that he'd not had before.

Was...was means...and the bag...oh no. Mikey...Robin...I didn't make it!

Confusion gave way to sorrow, but both feelings were becoming distant. One thing that had not become distant was his desire to see Robin and Mikey. He didn't want to leave them, but he knew that staying wasn't a healthy option. Time was getting short, even if he wasn't sure why he knew that, and he had one last chance to say goodbye.

He found himself seated in the ambulance. Both Robin and Mikey were hooked up to a heart machine, and Robin had been given an IV. She looked so exhausted, but she also seemed to glow with a brightness he'd never seen before. Mikey was nestled against her breast, contentedly wrapped in a blue blanket, drinking his first nourishments. They were beautiful. He wished Robin could see him, or hear him. There was no time left to tell her all the things that needed to be said. Leaning over, he kissed her on that favorite spot on her neck, and whispered, "You are amazing, and so is Mikey."

She looked up for a minute, as if she almost could see and hear and feel his presence. A smile crossed her face, and she rubbed her neck softly.

Michael reached over and grabbed Mikey's toe, which was now covered in a soft sock and sticking out of the blanket. Mikey paused for a moment, and then turned to face his father one last time. They gazed at each other, and Michael saw himself in the baby's eyes along with things more eternal. Michael saw that, in that moment, they were life and death, made of the same stuff, but in different states. Mikey smiled at his father, and then returned to his mother and her attentions. Warmth filled Michael as the world began to swirl in shades of red, gold, blue, and all colors of earth and sky and spirit.

Summoning: When Spirits Surprise Us

One of the beautiful parts of my Baptist upbringing is my undying love and fascination with Biblical stories. I am particularly in love with the Old Testament. The stories of the Old Testament, particularly the stories dealing with the birth of Israel and the reign of her kings, are wonderful training ground for eventually reading the likes of Shakespeare, Keats, Poe, and most of our literary canon. I like to describe the Old Testament as the first great historical novel because that's how you have to read it (this doesn't mean I think the book is fictional, just that it *reads* that way). Sex, violence, mystical beings, sex, miracles and curses, tragic heroes and comic characters, and great lessons learned both by God Himself and his people—it has everything!

Summoning comes from a story found in I Samuel chapter 28. Saul, King of Israel, is at war with his enemies the Philistines again, and he's scared. Unfortunately his prophet, Samuel, is dead, and God has, at least according to scripture, withdrawn his support of Saul. He is lost and desperate. In his great fear he turns to this female spiritualist rather than God, and gets an answer he doesn't expect.

As a Christian, I've been taught by some fellow believers that we aren't supposed to believe in ghosts, or that ghosts are inherently evil. I've even heard teachers say that spirits we might see are demons in disguise. I've even heard teachers claim that what Saul ultimately experiences is not a Godly thing at all. There are also teachers who blame the woman for this obviously sinful thing Saul

chooses (according to the scripture it is against the law). In spite of all this teaching, I am struck by the fact that here in the middle of the scripture is a ghost story!

My favorite character in this tale is not Saul (who is a bit of a panty-waist), but the spiritualist. In the Old Testament, only a few women get more than one or two lines of dialog at a time (Abraham's wife, Sarah was allowed two lines, and she was the mother of Israel!). This woman gets seven lines of dialog, each one leading Saul closer to what he thought he wanted. In those seven lines, she is revealed as intuitive, sharp, and, ultimately, compassionate.

When I retold this tale, I wanted a chance to see the story from her point of view. In scripture, the story is pretty straight forward, and told in a distant third-person. We also get the idea that that unknown third-person author thought she was a charlatan. What the scriptures don't say is that she is a bad person, no matter what teachers today say. I wanted her side of the story to be revealed.

Summoning

“Come back tomorrow. We’re closed,” I said, hearing a pounding on my door as I blew out my lamps and snuffed the remaining incense burners around the room. It had been a long day, and the last thing I wanted was some fool asking about his love life.

A powerful voice responded, “You must help me, witch.”

I looked up at him. Who would have the gall to use that word out on the street, even if everyone had gone home? Was the man an idiot?

There was an air about him that countered that thought. The open door framed his large form. The shadow that poured into my sitting room made him seem Goliath-like. A cloak was pulled down to cover his face. His voice was commanding, as though he was used to giving orders and being obeyed. It was clear he wasn’t from Endor or any of the villages close by. His accent spoke of Jerusalem, a place I’d once loved, but had since put behind me. He glanced nervously behind him as if he expected to be seen.

I’d seen a lot of these types come through my door, especially in the last days before I was forced to move to this dung heap. In Jerusalem I was known as Semira the Summoner. Even after my husband and children died, I kept my house because I made money. Things were great until the king had gotten more religious than usual a few years ago, and declared that all witches cease and desist their work. Soon, keeping us from our work was not enough. All of us who practiced the “dark arts” were escorted to the closest city gate and told to leave. Endor was about as far away as I could get without moving into Philistine territory. I always swore that if I had

my chance, I'd spit on the king for robbing me of a good income and a nice house, things I'd had before coming to my personal version of the wilderness.

If I hadn't needed the money that night, I would have been more adamant in my refusal. Things had been tight in Endor. There was a war in progress, thanks, once again, to that poor excuse for a king. Samuel the prophet had been right. Having a king was a crock.

"Look, mister, I don't know what you mean by 'witch.' The king made it clear that people that did that sort of thing were persona non-grata in Israel," I started.

"I need to call up a spirit. It's very important," From under his hood, his eyes gleamed and darted like a trapped animal. Things in his life must be really going to *Sheol*.

"You know that Saul, that ...our...king...has basically cut people like me from everything. You coming here puts me in grave danger, big guy," I said as I continued to clean up from my day, "and how do you even know that I am what you say I am?"

He sat down on my pillows. The dust rose from his cloak. Great. Now I'd have to sweep up his mess too. He twisted the corners of his cloak in his hands as if he were attempting to control himself. My son used to do this when he didn't get his way. I could see his eyes grow dark under the cloak as raving fear turned to anger. Eyes are funny. Everything else can be darkened or shadowed, but a man's eyes can still be quite visible.

Speaking so quietly I had to move close to hear him, he said, "Woman. I was told that you were the one to seek out in matters such as this. I walked a long way to

find you. My time is short. I can pay you more than you make in an entire month, but you must help me.”

I sat down in front of him. “Look, mister. It has been made sort of clear that those of us who practice certain...arts...are subject to death if we’re caught. Even out here, far away from Jerusalem, we know that’s more than a threat.” I took his hands, which were rough and dirty like the rest of him. Was he a warrior?

I turned them over, and glanced down at them, “You’re not from here or any where close,” I said quietly. His eyes widened a bit. Probably thought I’d begun my craft. “I figure you must be from Jerusalem spying for Saul, waiting for me to do something ‘witchy’ so that you can bring my pretty little head back to him. So I say to you,” I leaned in very close almost touching his nose with my own, “Go...away.”

He started trembling, and his eyes went from dark brown to pitch black in seconds. Then he snatched his hands from mine, and lifted one as if to slap me. I suddenly wished that Iyar, my manservant in Jerusalem had survived our journey to Endor. Bracing, I continued to stand and stare into his eyes, paralyzed half by fear, and half by a stubborn refusal to cower for this strange man. His rage turned to frustration, which slowly softened to fear. In my estimation, this was the real problem inside this man. I wondered what a man of his stature and obvious physical prowess would fear. In another time and place, I would have offered him comfort and perhaps even solace in my bed. He seemed so...lost.

He lowered his hand, and tears flooded down his face. Finally he said in an almost childlike voice, “As YHWH lives, no harm will come to you.”

I want you to know I didn't call the spirit because of this oath. His oath was no comfort at all. Men swear by all sorts of different gods to anyone who will hear, but in the end most of them will break those same oaths if the end result will serve them better.

I'm not really sure why I decided to help my visitor that night except that I pitied him. Here was a huge warrior man, felled by his own terror. After seeing his pain, and hearing him swear as if he had deep connections to the LORD (mustn't say His name, you know), I turned and began lighting my lamps again.

At this point, I need to confess something. In all the time I practiced fortunes, soothsaying, "witchery," there was never a need for me to do more than study a person closely. You can usually learn a lot about people and their desires and needs by asking loaded questions, studying their faces and eyes, and giving vague answers. One of the first things my teacher taught me when I was an apprentice wisdom was that people will usually tell you more than any so-called spirit. My plan, even with this poor soul, was to go through the usual incense burning, and swaying and moaning. I'd ask a few questions in my most morose voice, convey the *repairim's*, the shade's, message from *Sheol*, and send him on his way.

I began by ceremonially pouring a goblet of wine for each of us.

"This is the wine of clear sight. May it clear and open our minds for the message to come," I intoned, as he drank greedily.

As he drank, I began chanting in my poor excuse for Assyrian. People expect this, so I do it as part of the show. I danced around and pulled out an iron spade to dig my hole. One way to "summon" *repairim* is dig a hole and call into *Sheol*. I could

have killed an animal and used its liver, but I didn't have an animal, and I didn't want to clean up the mess when he was finally gone. I finished the shallow hole in my floor quickly. Kneeling, I looked up at the man.

"Who shall I summon, seeker of greater truths," I asked. Most people love this drama. My visitor was too focused to be impressed. Meanwhile, all I wanted to do was to finish and have dinner. Then he uttered, "Summon Samuel the prophet."

He couldn't be serious. Samuel was YHWH's man. Word was that he'd died recently, and Israel had no prophet. I must have stared too long because he said again, louder, "Summon Samuel, woman!"

I nodded, mutely, and then turned back to the hole. I couldn't drop the illusion at this point. I continued to chant in broken Assyrian. Then I added Samuel's name and started rocking back and forth. Lighting more incense around me, I raised my voice and then my arms to allow the Samuel, Israel's greatest prophet, to speak through me.

The low light of the oil lamp exploded before me, and I fell back into the man. His breath was hot on my neck, and his heart was racing. I'm not sure what he saw, but my vision was, at first, a curtain of gleaming white. The curtain dissipated, and I began to see blue, violet, green, aqua, and finally black curls swirling out of the hole to wrap around me. Semira the Summoner was amplified past mortality to color and light and omnipotent power. I opened a door in the hole that allowed Ishtar, Isis, all forms of *elohim*, gods great and small, to fly out and surround me like guardians. The room was filled with a great power that I was wont to control. I

spoke unknown languages all at once. The scent of sandalwood and rose expanded in an intensity I'd never experienced.

Then time, and space seemed to pause as Samuel, prophet of the One True God, ascended from the hole. The prophet wore a tattered cloak and a long beard. His eyes glowed with a light brighter than all of the gods around me, and he faced me with a frown. My mind scrambled for a response to this...this...magic. I felt myself starting to faint. The *elohim* reached out and held me up.

"Oyvey, woman! Why are you helping Saul, your king, command me back to the earth?" asked Samuel as he gazed on Saul.

My client was Saul? The king? THE KING! I turned to Saul, who continued to stare at the hole expectantly, as if nothing had happened.

"Is THIS why you wanted me to call the Prophet?" I screamed with the voice of a million gods known and unknown. Their energies filled me with the desire to crush this pathetic excuse of a man. *Do you not know that I could destroy you with the bat of an eyelash, mortal?* I thought as I glared down at him. Samuel looked at me and shook his head.

"Peace, child. He is not yours to judge, nor does he belong to any of the rest of you," he said in a still, small voice that reigned over the others in my head as he pointed at the *elohim*.

The *elohim* pulled away, leaving me feeling chilled and empty.

Saul, who was not aware of the power around him, thought I was frightened and replied, "Do not be afraid. What do you see?"

The *elohim* responded through me, "I see a god coming up out of the earth."

Saul pushed the cloak back from his face, and leaned forward. He was a handsome man with a strong but petulant jaw line, and cinnamon skin. His hair swept back from his face in an ebony wave. I was enough separate from the *elohim* feel a flood of desire come over me. This was stopped, however, as the *elohim* drew close again. Through their eyes, his heart was a huge cluster of silver worms writhing in and out, devouring each other since none of his flesh was left. I closed my eyes in revulsion.

Kneeling next to me he whispered, "What does this *elohim* look like?" His voice brought me back to the moment. He was trembling with his own desire.

Isis, Ishtar and the rest responded through me, "See for yourself, mortal!"

The last thing I remember is seeing Saul fall on his face at the edge of the hole in my floor, moaning like a wounded animal. The *elohim* wrapped me in their color and power so completely that my finite world no longer mattered. Beyond them I felt a greater power, and I reached for it. It was comfort, kindness, sadness, loneliness, and love beyond anything I'd known. I knew it was YHWH, and I knew He was, is, and will be long after my *elohim* would lose touch with my world. I felt like I was forever, and yet not.

From somewhere distant I heard Saul...Was it, is it, will it be, Saul? wail, "Have mercy on me, LORD!"

A voice spoke quietly inside me, "Saul must die. Saul must die." The voice was not triumphant, but sad and painful. As I felt these things, I was released from the *elohim*, I was no longer a part of all things and all beings, but became the mortal woman, Semira, once more. Saul looked up at me from the dirt like he'd been beaten.

All the hunger, the greed, the impatience was washed from his face. The warrior was gone too. All that was left was a broken man who needed Samuel to comfort him.

“The time for mercy has passed, my son,” Samuel said simply, and then returned to *Sheol* with the fathers and mothers who went before us.

Saul, the God-chosen king of Israel, wept the tears of an abandoned child in the dirt of my two-room house.

I took him by the hands and lifted him out of the dirt. We ate roasted lamb and drank wine, but neither of us spoke a word. After dinner, he placed the dirt back into my floor slowly and solemnly. I finally asked him, “My king, what troubles you?”

“I am without hope,” he said, bowing his head. With that, he strode out of my home into the moonless night. I could not sleep after he left. All I could do is watch the sun rise another day, and wonder at all I had seen.

Scared of the Dark: When Your Kid Tells You about the Monster in Their Room

Writers pick up stories from everywhere, and I am no exception. Sometimes these stories come from the news, and other times they come from your own flesh and blood. “Scared of the Dark” springs from a series of incidents that my daughter experienced a couple of years ago in her own room.

While some parents would have freaked out, and immediately taken their child to the psychiatrist for medication and therapy, I am the sort of parent that takes this sort of thing in stride. Having grown up in a household that accepted the idea of spirits, and demons walking the earth (and our house), her story didn’t worry me all that much. I have no doubt that she encountered and battled something real in her room, even if I never saw it. Some things you just have to trust.

She offered the story to me back in the spring when she found out that this project was focused on ghost stories. I asked her to write about what she saw and sensed during the situation. She gave me half a page of really boring notes. At first, I was frustrated. I knew there had to be more to the episodes that she wasn’t telling me. She swore that there was no more to it.

As I began putting things together, I realized that her voice was going to be an important part of the story. I wanted to make sure that her energy flowed through the piece, and part of that energy is the way she expresses herself. Gina has a very distinctive vocabulary and often uses that that vocabulary in a very blunt, almost weapon-like fashion. In early readings of this story, all but one of my trusted readers commented that I’d captured Gina’s voice almost perfectly. The one

exception was Gina herself. She complained that I made her sound stupid and juvenile. I refused to change the voice, and she learned to live with it.

The story was a challenge to get onto paper for me. Some stories just spill out of my soul, but this one came a bit at a time. I think part of the problem stemmed from having to get around the mom part of me, and is just a little freaked out about knowing that this thing visited my daughter and I didn't know. Also, because it was told in first-person, I had to attempt to get inside my daughter's head and in a sense be her for a while. This was hard, but I think I managed to get an idea of how she thinks and her reasoning, mostly by talking to her a lot. One thing I got from doing this is that she is a basically honest girl trying to figure out the world as she sees it. The world she sees is not the world that most of us sees, which either makes her special or crazy. At the same time, she is, like most teenaged girls, trying to find out how she fits in the world and what empowers her. That empowerment protects her from all the things that are monstrous in her life, whether we are talking about bastard fathers or other less explainable creatures in her life.

Scared of the Dark

Mom has always been sort of cool about what I see. She says it runs in our family. Granny sees and has talked to spirits most of her life, and Granddaddy says that our house seems to draw spirits, probably because of Granny. Mom says we see things because we're more open to the idea of the supernatural. I think she's probably right. We have several spirits who are a part of the fabric of our house in Powder Springs. My dad's father comes by to check on us (my brother, Stu, saw him first) sometimes. There's the Indian who crosses up and down the hall occasionally, and there's Fuzzy (mom thinks he's her dead cat, Smudge), who is as big as a dog but is really a cat. I often find him sitting beside my bed in the middle of the night staring at me with his large green eyes glowing with otherness.

It started with zombie dreams. Always. At first, mom was convinced that Dad had made me watch those sorts of movies when I was with him. Dad was big into all things undead, but I don't really like the idea of creatures that only want to eat my brains, so I never watched them with him. Anyway, I'd have zombie dreams, and then this spirit and his buddies would appear in my room late at night, ready to cause trouble.

Stop looking at me like that. I've told you before, I can see things—spirits—ghosts. It's not like *The Sixth Sense* kind of thing. I don't see them the way Haley Joel Osment saw them in that movie. Not all. Maybe see isn't the right word. I *sense* them—their shape, their clothes, their energy. My brother does it too, but not the way I do. I think I saw my first one at the cemetery in Marietta—the one on Powder Springs Road next to the place where we turn to go to church. I saw a baby playing

in the cemetery. We had been to church, so I thought it must be baby Jesus! I ran to Mom yelling, "I saw baby Jesus!" She went back with me, and the baby was gone. I was three. Not long after that we had a talk about spirits and how the baby might have been a spirit instead of baby Jesus. She also told me not to be afraid either way.

I learned pretty early that spirits are like people (even though some of them aren't people). Some are good and some are...well...not so good...or even evil. Granddad is a good spirit. The Indian seems to be ambivalent. He has a job to do, and he does whatever it is that he's supposed to do. He simply crosses through this area (our house) on his way to an unknown somewhere with an equally unknown task. Mom seems to think that he might be guarding something. There's also the little girl who stares at me from the dining room. She just stands and stares. I had to start closing my bedroom door because of her. You ever try sleeping when someone just stares at you? She's not evil though, just creepy.

The thing that showed up after the zombie dreams was definitely evil. I never knew his name, but then with evil that large, you really don't want to know its name.

Some people probably think I'm making this up. I've got a Goth reputation to uphold, and this is a story that can do that. While I've embraced my inner Goth (I don't need to wear black all the time to prove it), I'm not going to tell stories to make me cooler. I'm cool all on my own. I'm sure that there are psychologists who would say that this is just a manifestation of my fear of the dark, my upset over my bastard of a father, or my own depressive attitude about things blah, blah, blah. I've heard it

all, believe me, and it's all shit. I know what I saw. People (adults most of all) don't get that there are some really, really good reasons to be afraid of the dark.

I rolled over that night after waking up from a particularly disturbing zombie dream where an undead hoard were chasing me and my brother through the house. One of them had just grabbed my arm with a slimy, almost detached hand when I jolted awake. I focused first on the large glowing numbers from my clock. Two thirty in the morning. As my eyes made their way around my room, I saw him. He was there standing in the corner of closet to the door leading to the hall. I would have rolled over and probably ignored him, but one—he had violated the understanding I had with most of the spirits in the house that a closed door meant to stay out, and two--he was leering at me with this grin that emanated pure, hungry evil. I could sense that he wasn't alone. His friends were all clustered around my closet, like that was their place of entrance. During this first visit, they stayed in the background, dark shadows compared to his strong physicality. Maybe they wanted to see how their pal did with the new victim first. All I could do was shake and try to hide under my covers.

He moved toward my bed, and I could see—sense him better. He was tall and skinny. As he approached my bed, his muscles twisted and bunched under his leathery skin like he was packaged in a body that wasn't quite his size or shape. His shadowy friends became bold enough by the time he got to the bed to come out and circle around it. They were reaching, always reaching toward me.

I didn't want any of them to touch me for any reason. *Don't touch me. Don't touch me. Don't touch me.* As this thought grew strong inside of me, a strange thing

happened. A bubble of glowing blue light formed around my bed. They kept reaching out, but didn't seem to want to touch the light that surrounded me. One of them got bold and lightly touched the light. I felt it scream. A gap remained in the circle where that particular shadow spirit had once been.

Their friend, the large, ugly fellow, however, was nonplussed by my accidental shield. He reached out through the gap, and sliced through the bubble with a long, pointed fingertip. Before I could stop him, he was in the bed with me. I tried to scramble to the edge of the bed, but before I could get myself moving, he grabbed my leg, pulling me back to him. His claws cut into my thigh and a low, predatory laugh rumbled from his bare, yet not bare chest. I tried to scream, but my voice was locked deep inside me. When he took my arm with his other claw, I began to punch him with my loose fist.

Mom has always said I was stronger than my tiny frame would indicate. I guess being small makes you more likely to fight harder. Anyway, I kicked him hard in places I'd been told to kick guys although I'm not sure he had soft parts in the usual places. I also started shoving him toward the bubble and the edge of the bed. At first, he seemed surprised. Maybe his usual prey didn't fight. After his initial surprise, he seemed to become more interested in holding on to me. Our struggle continued till I kicked him into the bubble and he was almost yanked by some unknown force away from me and the bed. I'm not sure whether it was his friends, who became frightened by our battle, or if it was some force of good rescuing me before I fought harder and he ended me. Still, as fast as it had begun, it was over. The bubble was gone along with him and his friends.

It would have been easy to shrug the whole episode off the next morning except for the red scratches on the inside of my right thigh. They lasted for a whole week. I didn't mention this to Mom or anyone else.

I knew, somehow, that this was far from over even though I really didn't know what led him and his friends to my room in the first place. Maybe he had a thing for small, seemingly unprotected virgins. Maybe he was just looking for a snack on the way back home to his level of hell.

I also knew that I needed to be more prepared. The blue bubble of light was accidental the first time, but I didn't want it to be that way next time. I wanted to know how to do that again, but make it stronger. I was raised a Christian, but I wasn't completely convinced that my raising had anything to do with what had been generated around my bed that night. I hadn't prayed to anyone or anything. I'd simply put my force of will into the whole *don't touch me* thought. I could probably do that again, sure. What worried me was that the force field that had been generated during his first visit hadn't bothered the big guy. Still, maybe if I could put my will into other things, other weapons, I'd have a better chance if—no when—he returned.

The next night, after everyone was asleep, I tried to make the bubble again. I'd think about not wanting to be touched, but nothing would happen. I concentrated harder—nothing. Then I got to thinking about what else was happening that night. I was scared and angry. When I got scared and angry normally, I'd also get stronger. Stuart could attest to that, as well as a few of my

former boyfriends, one in particular who sported a small hand print across his face for a week. Perhaps emotional energy made a difference.

I focused on the emotions I felt the night before, visualizing what had happened. At first it was difficult, and then I could feel the fear and disgust and a bit of righteous anger rise inside of me. Light began to flow around me, crackling and popping like lightning. There was no bubble, but I felt like I was at the epicenter of a storm. My long brown hair lifted off my slender shoulders as the storm of emotion swirled around me. I felt safe and strong. Then I heard the clunk of Mom's feet hitting the floor in her room. The light, the storm, everything stopped and disappeared. As the last of the energy drained from me, I heard a light tapping on my closed door.

"Gina, are you ok?" asked Mom in a whisper.

"I just had to go to the bathroom," I replied.

"Do you have to turn on your light? It shines into my room?" she said.

"I do that so I don't kill myself on something in here," I said.

She sat there a minute, weighing the sense this made (my room is a cluttered mess of books, art supplies, and stuffed animals), and then said, "I guess that makes sense, just try not to wake me up if it happens again."

"Ok."

While she went back to bed, I lay back on my own and thought about what I'd done. I wondered if this was magic like I heard some of my dad's Wiccan friends talk about. I knew it was a clear, clean energy that countered the evil that was in my room and bed the night before. If this was it, and it would keep that thing out of my

space, I was more than happy to try it again. I knew I'd have to do more than make a bubble next time, so there would be more nocturnal practices. I just hope I had time to before he decided to come back.

Blessedly, I didn't have any zombie dreams for the rest of that week. I would wait till the house was still, and my family was breathing in that familiar steady way that was common in our house after around 11 pm. First, I'd light some sandalwood incense, to help me relax, and then practice making a bubble around my bed. I got good with that pretty quickly. The only problem was that if I held it too long, it would bother Mom. In order to keep her from investigating like she did the first night, I would make my way to the bathroom after fifteen or twenty minutes of practice. It worked like a charm.

After my journey to the bathroom, I would begin trying other things. I started focusing the energy that I used to create the bubble shield to make things like fireballs. I couldn't see the fireballs, but once again, could sense them. I started visualizing them in my mind and then focused on where they needed to go. By the time he returned, I felt ready.

Zombies were chasing me and my brother through the woods toward somewhere we'd never been. Stuart had a chain saw and I had some sort of sword. We were failures in the weapon department, but that was the way these dreams tended to go. We'd be poorly defended, run through strange places, and end up...well, I never was really sure because I'd wake up.

The unnamed one and his friends were back in my room. This time I wasn't as afraid as I was pissed off. Who did this thing think he was anyway? I focused my anger into blue balls of flame and started throwing them at him. His muscles twisted like snakes under his skin as they bounced off him and onto his friends. While they screamed and dissolved or backed away from me, he kept coming toward the bed, laughing that same guttural laugh from the last visit. This pissed me off even more and made me more determined to keep him away.

He leaned over me, reaching out a claw just as the now familiar and controlled blue bubble formed over me. Shaking his head, like he pitied me for trying, he took his claw and attempted to cut through it like the first time. The bubble sizzled and burned off his claw. He backed away shaking his hand hard. His cold gleaming eyes narrowed, and another laugh rumbled from deep inside him. I threw another round of fireballs, but he ignored them as he leered over me and tried to force the bubble open again. The power of the bubble grabbed him and danced over his dark bare lizard-like skin. I pushed my will into the bubble and used it to shake him hard.

Leave me alone, and don't touch me! I thought toward him as the energy flowed through me and sizzled all over him like lightning. He shrank back a bit, his eyes still gleaming in a hungry reptilian way. He couldn't seem to leave, nor could he move very easily. I apparently had trapped him. We held this way for a good minute, until I thought I heard a light tapping on my door. *Oh no, it's mom.* His eyes gleamed for a second as if he heard the tapping too, and wanted what he thought might be behind the door. With one more push of emotional energy, blue flames began to rise

from his already scorched skin. *GO AWAY AND LEAVE US ALONE!* I released him, praying that I'd done enough to keep my mother safe. He still had that hungry look in his dark, dead looking eyes, but strangely, he backed away, confidence shaken. As quickly as he had arrived in my room, he departed with the remaining shadow spirits who weren't smart enough to get out earlier. Before he exited through my closet, he looked over his shoulder at me, eyes less hungry and more wary. I was shaken but glad to know I had the upper hand in this matter. Perhaps I wasn't as tasty of a morsel as he first thought.

As I contemplated this, I heard the familiar creak Mom's bed made when she rolled out to check on things at night. Although she tried to walk quietly, the hardwood floor crackled and popped with each step she took to my door.

"Gina, are you ok? I thought I heard voices. You're not on that cell phone again, are you? I told you, no calls after 10, no matter how dire your friends think their problems are."

"No phone calls—I know. I'm fine, Mom. I was reading. You know I talk to my books," I replied.

"Sweetie, it's three o'clock in the morning..." she said. She was also prone to having her sentences drift off, especially when she was sleepy.

"I couldn't sleep," I said, simply. I found that if I answered simply, she would leave things alone.

"Well, try to sleep now. You have school tomorrow," she said as she padded off.

“Ok,” I said, as I rolled over to attempt to do as she asked. Mom isn’t really too demanding, but she does like for us to sleep. Lucky for me, I had fought enough to win my night back, at least for a while.

Ouija:

When You Mine Your Childhood for Stories

I read a book just prior to getting serious about writing this project. A friend of mine from high school who is a writer and producer for a cable channel located here in Georgia recommended it to me after I'd whined on Facebook about having a large case of writer's block. That book was Ray Bradbury's *Zen in the Art of Writing*. It is not a technical book, and for that I am thankful. Instead, it is a book about creative process and finding stories. It taught me what I already knew after thirty years of my own writing. Sometimes, we need a wise man to remind us of those things.

One of the things he talks about is mining your childhood fears and experiences for stories. After reading this suggestion, I began looking at my childhood for the first time in a very long time. At first glance, it seems like a pretty mundane thing. I grew up in a 1960s style ranch in a small town 30 miles north of Atlanta. My daddy worked for Southern Bell, and my momma stayed home and baked bread while raising my brother and me. We attended church on Sunday, and said grace over meals. It was normal...sort of.

When I began digging around inside my inner-attic, I discovered things I knew but had packed away. Then I discovered my box of childhood fears. I feared things like stuffed alligators (still fear real ones), death, and the Ouija board that was stored in my room for years.

From the time I was probably three until I was about seven or eight, my parents tinkered around with that Ouija board. They'd go to friends' houses and play

with the board there. There were times my grandparents would come over and mess with it too. I won't swear I ever saw anything, but apparently, my parents talked to, saw, and interacted with spirits for several years of my early childhood, and then just stopped. Church became a bigger part of our lives at that point, and the Ouija thing was no longer a good thing. Even after this shift, the things I witnessed when they played with the board stuck with me, and I ended up fearing the board.

Another thing Bradbury encourages is taking that fear and playing around with it by stretching it, or twisting it around a bit. This story comes from an exercise where I twisted my childhood fear with a grown up fear. For the record, part of the story is true, and part of it, well...it's twisted.

Ouija

I watched my parents and Rosalyn and Sonny as they brought out the Ouija board from the box they'd brought with them to the cookout. Almost every Saturday evening, Daddy and Sonny would grill hamburgers and hotdogs (the hotdogs were mostly for me because I hated hamburgers), Momma and Rosalyn would set up stuff in Rosalyn's small, 1960s ranch kitchen, and I would play outside. After dinner, the adults messed with the Ouija board. Tonight was no different. Rosalyn and Sonny got out the card table, and they began to set up for the evening.

Their game was infinitely more interesting than my own toys. The board was shiny and wooden, unlike most games I'd seen in my short life. It didn't fold at all. All the ABCs were painted on it in lettering that was as beautiful as the Old English lettering my Daddy sometimes painted on posters for church. My favorite things on it though were the sun and the moon, which were painted on each corner. They looked like drawings from my picture books at home.

Momma and Daddy warned me to never touch the board. I always wanted to touch the board, but I knew that they were serious. Ouija was for grown-ups only.

My daddy stood and leaned over the table to begin the game with a prayer and a blessing. Once I asked, "Why do you pray over the board?"

"I do it to make sure the bad spirits can't come, and if they do try, then we can get rid of them fast," he said.

"Do they usually come, Daddy?" I continued, feeling a little worried.

"No, Mya. But this tells those spirits that we're ready for them."

Ready for what? I didn't know. Apparently, inviting spirits for this game was a dangerous matter, but one that we didn't need to worry about. WE had God on our side.

Daddy used his church praying voice as the light gleamed off his balding head. "Father we ask thee to bless this board and pray protect the users tonight," he intoned. God must listen to Daddy because he knew how to speak God's language of thee and thou, just like the people of the Bible I learned about in Sunday school, so I knew we had to be safe.

Momma sat on the opposite side of the board from him with her fingertips already on the plastic. She was the wisest looking person I knew at the time. At age 30, she had silver hair, and it waved in a way my straight blond hair could only dream of doing. Her almost black eyes danced in anticipation as my Daddy prayed. She loved talking to spirits. It always seemed to me that the spirits generally loved talking to her too because whenever they played with the Ouija board, she led the conversations. They would tell her about their past lives, how they died, and sometimes, they'd tell her about her own life or the lives of the other people in the room.

When Daddy sat down, he put his fingertips on the ivory colored plastic pointer. I remembered that my mother called it a planchette. The word was pretty and old-fashioned, and I liked those sorts of words, so it was easy for me to remember. They both closed their eyes. Sonny and Rosalyn closed their eyes too. I didn't because I wanted to see everything.

“Is anyone there?” asked Momma. After the all- powerful blessing Daddy placed on the board, it seemed like a tiny question.

The planchette glided silently across the board of letters and numbers to the bottom left corner of the board where the word YES was painted.

Momma grinned and said, “Here we go.”

“Who are you?”

As we all watched, the planchette moved to different letters. Rosalynn, wrote down the letters as they were pointed out. She was a small, wiry woman who seemed amazed and amused by this activity all at the same time.

“He says he’s Robert E. Lee, Yvonne,” she said when there were no more letters.

Sonny, Rosalynn’s husband, ambled into the room from the kitchen with a beer in his hand. He laughed as sat his large frame into his black recliner. “This one’s a liar, Yvonne.”

Momma looked sharply at Sonny. She said simply, “Don’t say that, Sonny. Let’s just see what he has to say.”

The planchette began to move again, quickly.

Rosalynn scribbled frantically to try and keep up. She stared, and then started laughing. “Aw Sonny, you’ve made him mad. He says to tell you you’re an jackass.”

Sonny laughed with her. Daddy arched his eyebrow, as he laughed too and said, “Well that sort of proves he ain’t Robert E. Lee. The man didn’t cuss.”

Sonny said, “That you know of, Don.”

He and Daddy both laughed.

Momma asked, "What year were you born, General?" I suppose she figured that if the spirit knew this, it might verify his honesty. I climbed up off the floor and onto a chair so I could see what was being spelled out. I'd just learned to spell and this was a chance for a practical use of that skill.

The pointer picked out, 1-8-7-0.

Daddy looked at Momma and said, "He got his numbers turned around, Yvonne."

"I know."

I could tell Momma was getting a little tense.

"Maybe we should stop," said Rosalyn, sensing Momma's tension too.

"Daddy, is this a bad spirit?" I asked.

"No. He's probably just playing around," he said, calmly.

Momma closed her eyes, and asked, "Spirit. We doubt that you are Robert E. Lee. Who are you really?"

The letters under the planchette spelled out, "No one."

Rosalynn looked at my mother. "Looks like this one likes games."

"Alright 'No One', where are you from?"

"N-O-W-H-E—He says no where," Rosalynn looked up at everyone else. "I don't like this one."

"Stop playing games, spirit. Tell us where you're from," Momma asked in her most angry tone. I wondered if the spirit trembled the way I did when she used that on me.

The planchette stopped moving for a few minutes. All the adults leaned close to the board and stared for a while.

“Maybe he’s gone,” whispered Daddy.

The pointer yanked their hands across the board in a frenzied sort of way, making it hard for me to follow the spelling at first.

“What does it say, Roz?” asked Sonny, shifting forward in his recliner and sipping nervously from the beer.

“F-R-O-M,” Rosalynn spelled out loud. By now Sonny had gotten up was kneeling next to me to see the board. The planchette stopped and there was a long pause, as if the spirit was working for a bit of drama. Then the pointer jerked Momma and Daddy’s hands from the center of the board, to the far left. Before they could remove their hands, it accelerated to the right, and then flew off the board toward Sonny and me.

Sonny ducked, and I jumped back. How had that happened?!

Momma grabbed the planchette from mid-air, and flipped it upside down on the board. Daddy slammed his hands on each side of the planchette. I jumped again.

“I command thee in the name of Christ to depart from this home!” he said loudly.

All four of the adults stared for a moment. Rosalynn looked pale. Daddy began to look around like he expected to see something lurking in the corners of the room.

Sonny whispered, “Is it gone?”

Momma sat there for a moment, as though she were sensing what was in the air. "Yes. Don, we need to re-bless the board right now," she said quietly.

Daddy said a prayer that would have made the old preachers at church proud. He made it clear that evil spirits would face God's Holy Wrath if they even thought about coming for a visit. While he did that, I moved to the sliding glass door behind Momma. The lightning bugs were lighting the air like magic, and there was a man standing in the back yard.

He was tall, but small-boned. He wore a long brown coat and a hat like the leprechaun on the bulletin board at school I'd seen at St. Patrick's Day. As the lightning bugs blinked on and off, he looked directly at me, cigarette in hand, and winked at me.

Who was this man and why was he in the back yard?

"Momma, momma?" I said, going to her side.

Daddy said, "Your momma is busy right now, Mya. go play."

I went back to the glass door, and saw the man leaning against a pine tree, gazing at the ground. Then he looked up and waved as if he were shy, but wanted to be friendly anyway. I couldn't help but smile and raise my hand in return.

"Dad, don't you see him out there? He just waved at me," I said, pointing out the glass door.

"Who are you talking about?" He moved to the glass and peered out, watchfully, and replied, "Sweetie, I don't see anything."

"I swear he's right there!"

"Don, maybe it's an imaginary friend?" Rosalyn suggested.

“No! He’s right there, really!” I said. Adults were so dumb sometimes.

They all gazed blankly at the door for a moment, even Momma.

The man was still there, walking back and forth, swinging his coattails, still smiling. I looked back at them. Why couldn’t they see him? I wanted to say something again, but knew Daddy would grow impatient as he did whenever I insisted that I saw or knew something he did not. I moved away from the doors, and went to Sonny, who was again seated in his black vinyl recliner. Sonny was my friend. Maybe he would look again and take me seriously.

“Sonny, there really is a man in the backyard. I saw him,” she said.

He glanced at my parents, took another swig of beer, and got up. Sliding the glass door to the side, he stared all around carefully, and walked across the concrete porch looking for anything. Sonny walked right close to the man three or four times, never seeing him. Then he stepped back and slid the door back in place. “Well, honey, I guess he saw me comin’ and ran off ‘cause I didn’t see nothin’,” he said, leaning to my level, “Why don’t we go to the kitchen and get you an ice cream sandwich.” Not being one to turn away perfectly good ice cream, I followed, concluding that adults must be blind and stupid.

When I returned with my ice cream sandwich, the long, tall man was still there. Despite the growing twilight, it seemed that I could see him more sharply than the first time. He moved closer to the door, and he grinned a funny, playful grin, and made a face. I giggled.

He was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen up close. He wore boots that came above his knees, just like Errol Flynn in *Robin Hood*. His skin was pale and

smooth. I couldn't help but wave at him, and stare. He moved closer to the iron-railed porch, and signaled that I should come outside.

Part of me really wanted to go out and play with this beautiful man, but I was also frightened and didn't really know why. At first I shook my head, and covered my face. Maybe he would go away. After a few minutes, I peeked through my fingers, and my new friend was still there, lighting another cigarette. I couldn't help but smile, and wiggle my finger to invite him to the door. If he came to the door, I could prove to the adults that I wasn't pretending or being silly. Maybe he could have an ice cream sandwich too.

He came to the first step, he stopped short. Then he shook his head, moving his finger from side to side in warning. I put my hands on my hips, and cocked my head in question. He did it again and pointed at himself. Why couldn't he come inside, I wondered. Maybe he was just shy. I remembered Carol McDonald at school. On first day, she'd been so shy, she'd cried outside Mrs. Perry's room for an hour, refusing to come in.

His murky grey eyes gleamed as he indicated that I should come outside and play. He must be continuing the game. Sliding the glass door open, I leaned toward him. He looked a bit excited, like he was anticipating my first step. Then I stuck out my tongue.

The man smiled at her from the steps, but there was a brief moment where he looked frustrated and hungry. Dark emotion washed over his face, and then it was gone. I stepped back. Then he put up both hands in the universal symbol for "What now?" and I could sense his playfulness was back.

A subtle breeze blew through the room, shuffling the paper Rosalynn was writing on as Momma continued to talk to friendly spirits. It was cooler than I expected. Instead of the humid air of a Georgia evening in July, the breeze contained a breath of November. Dad spoke up.

“Mya, stay in or go out. Don’t just stand there with the door open. You’ll let all the flies out,” he said. Sonny laughed at that.

I looked back at them. They all had someone to play with, but I was alone in the house. I looked back at this man, and he winked and reached out to take my hand.

“I’m going out, Daddy,” I said slipping through the door.

The lightning bugs were already dancing in the cool, silver tinted summer night. Perhaps he could teach me to dance under their light. Stepping on the porch, I took my friend’s hand.

Works Cited

Bradbury, Ray. *Zen in the Art of Writing*. Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1990.

King, Stephen. *The Gunslinger*. New York: Penguin, 1989.

Biography

Jessica Nettles was born in Marietta, Georgia in the mid-sixties. She was raised in Powder Springs, Georgia in a three-bedroom ranch house, and grew up watching Cobb County grow up with her. She began writing at age eleven at the encouragement of her sixth grade teacher. By age twelve, she had decided that writing was to be her avocation. That decision stuck.

Intent on earning her B. A. in English, she entered Kennesaw College in fall of 1984. In 1986, she married and left school for eleven years. In 1997, she returned to Kennesaw State University, a divorced mother of two toddlers, to finish her degree. During this time, she was published twice in *O Georgia*, a collection of short stories by up-and-coming Georgia authors. She also wrote her first play, *Canning Season*. She finally completed her degree work in 2002.

In 2004, Jessica entered the MAPW program at KSU, and became a full-time Instructor of Learning Support English at Chattahoochee Technical College. She taught, wrote, raised children, and worked one class at a time toward her Master's degree. Her second play, *Around the Bend*, was completed during this time. She also worked on several scripts for her church, including an adaptation of *Charlie Brown Christmas*.

She continues to raise her two children, who are now teenagers, in the house she was raised in. Along with going to school, Jessica enjoys reading, music, bicycling, and being a part of the larger writing community of Atlanta.