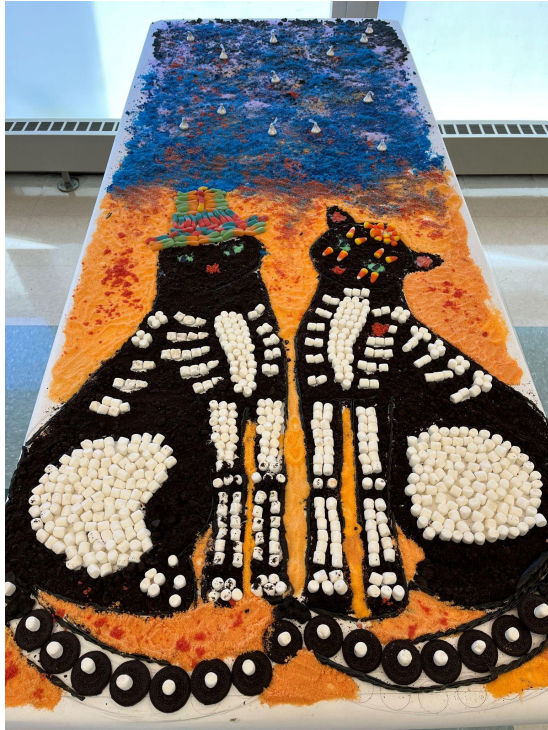


2nd Place: "The House Next Door" by David Patton



Emergency sirens interrupted Sunday's morning silence. The dead end street with only three single family, two-story dwellings from the 1950s was a quiet place to live. The house on the right was the center of activity. The emergency vehicles out front included police cars and a coroner's van. A repeated scene that I had witnessed once before.

My first time being awoken by sirens was in 1977, at age eleven. A young married couple lived next door. The husband worked for the county, and the wife was a stay at home mother. Both were very nice and pleasant. Their four year-old son was very

rambunctious and full of questions. My bedroom window overlooked most of the neighbor's front yard and a portion of their backyard too. The boy would swing in the backyard or play under the large tree for hours at a time.

After living in the house for nearly a year, the neighbors moved out a short time after the death of their son. One morning he was found by his mother at the bottom of the staircase twisted with a broken neck. My parents believed the young couple moved because the memory of their son was too much to bear. I was skeptical because when I was eight and we first moved in, rumors of a sixteen-year old girl who hung herself in the same house were whispered among the kids in the neighborhoods. The suicide occurred a few years prior to us moving in; I often wondered what would cause a teenager to take her own life.

My bedroom window beckoned me on sleepless nights. It was the house on the left that scared me the most. Everytime I peered into the backyard the empty swing was rocking back and forth. Even on windless nights the swing stayed in motion. It only happened once, but that was all I needed to be convinced the house held dark secrets. The swing was in motion just like every other night. This time, as the swing passed through the bottom of the arc, the motion completely stopped, and the swing turned a quarter turn to face me. I wanted to wave, but I was frozen in fear. A few seconds later, the swing turned back and continued its normal swinging motion.

Moments after the second body was loaded into the coroner's van and driven away, I joined my parents at the neighbor's house. On Friday, the older couple promised to visit their grandchildren on Saturday afternoon, but they never arrived. Sunday morning, the daughter drove over to check on her parents. She discovered both lying on their bed, dead from a single gunshot wound to their temples, a handgun in the father's hand, and a suicide note signed by both on the nightstand. The note was dated Friday night and spoke of hearing children's voices throughout the house and around the tree in the backyard. The retired couple could no longer live with the children's voices crying out for help.

The house next door stayed vacant for two years. During the needed renovations to improve the appeal, four children's skulls were found inside the walls, and four sets of headless remains were found buried in the corners of the backyard. An investigation revealed the original owners of the house had four children, two boys and two girls. Nobody remembered seeing these kids in the daytime, but they were heard playing in the backyard on moonless nights.