

## 1st Place: "Redemption" by Christina Salidas



Kate Maslow loved her job. She was good at it and she knew it, she could *feel* it. Word spread quickly that she was the therapist to see to help you deep dive into your neuroses and trauma and come out the other side transformed. Kate was authentic, sincere and skilled and created such a safe space even the most unyielding and difficult clients felt secure.

Her waiting list for an appointment was ever growing and Kate felt on top of the world. She recently had signed a lease for a new office space and it was perfect. The best part was that her office was in a building that had previously been recording studios, so each office was sound proof. Gone was the need for those ubiquitous sound machines every therapist had outside their door to protect client privacy. Kate was assured by the building manager that no sound could travel through her office walls. She hoped that this added layer of privacy would make her clients feel even more safe.

Micheal was her next client and he was right on time, per usual. He was a quiet man and seemingly meek even though he had an imposing frame. This would be their third session together and Kate was hoping he would divulge a little more instead of his typical skirting around painful subjects. In his last session, Micheal made a point to ask about the soundproof office, so Kate was hopeful he felt safe.

After an exchange of pleasantries Kate said, "All right Micheal, tell me what's been going on in your life. What brings you in today?"

"I wanted to maybe talk about something that I feel really conflicted about. But I don't know..." His eyes darted around anxiously.

“ I see you're feeling nervous,” Kate said kindly, “and that’s ok. This is a safe space and I’m not here to judge you...” Before she could speak further Micheal abruptly stood up and started to pace, his hands grabbing his head, beads of sweat appeared on his brow.

His words came out in a torrential rush “ I eat people, ok? I don’t want to but it’s like I have to and I can’t help it, I...eat ...people.”

The words lingered in the still air. Kate could feel the blood drain from her face and her mouth felt oddly dry. Her heart was beating so fast in that quiet room. “I’m sorry, what..what?” Her throat constricted; her words came out in a near whisper.

Micheal plopped back down on the sofa, he seemed to stare right past Kate as he spoke. His voice became monotone and she thought she saw saliva pooling at the corner of his mouth.

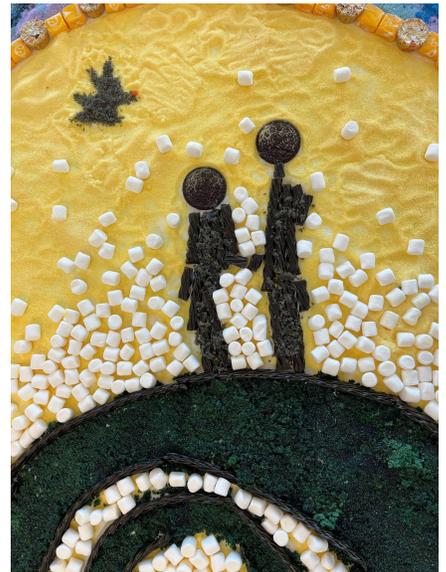
“I get...so hungry, ya know? It’s like a strange kind of hunger that can only be satisfied by one thing. Maybe it’s the texture, the taste...I, I don’t know...it’s hard to come by...” His eyes locked back on Kate. “Sometimes opportunities present themselves...”

*Oh my God, Kate thought, is this it? Am I going to die?* She could feel her face start to go cold and numb and for a brief second her terror seemed to render her completely immobile, even her breath was imperceptible.

Suddenly, she remembered something he had said. **“Conflicted”**

Could she use his cognitive dissonance and her own skills to save herself? Clutching her pen tightly to stop her trembling hands, Kate swallowed hard and implored, “Micheal, please..... let me try to help you.”

He leaned in close and winked, “Well now, I was hoping you would, Kate.”



## 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.

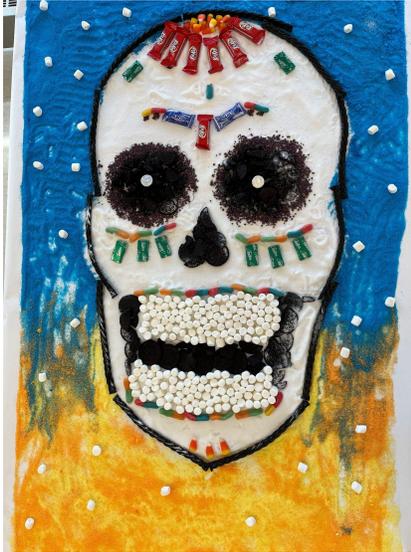
After living in the house for nearly a year, the neighbors moved out a short time after the death of their son. One morning he was found by his mother at the bottom of the staircase twisted with a broken neck. My parents believed the young couple moved because the memory of their son was too much to 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.

### 3rd Place: "The Peanut Farmer" by Jory Woods



The dimly lit Oval Office seemed to close in around me, and the secrecy within the room, even here, weighed heavily on my shoulders. As the intelligence community representatives began their revelation, my heart raced, expecting the benign truth of benevolent extraterrestrial beings. But what I was about to hear proved to be far more sinister and unsettling.

They meticulously explained that major religions, including Christianity, were simply tools constructed by extraterrestrial beings to control and manipulate all of humanity. My faith, my very core, was being torn asunder by

ten scared men in black suits. They revealed layers of deception I could never have fathomed.

As they continued, I somehow felt nothing and everything all at once. The knowledge that our religions were mere tools in a cosmic experiment was numbing. The belief that these beings created us, shaping our history and guiding our destiny, obliterated any true role or responsibility I held as President.

But the most harrowing part of the briefing was still yet to come. The intelligence representatives leaned in closer, their voices hushed and their expressions cold. They revealed that the extraterrestrial beings responsible for these manipulations had a message for me.

As the words were spoken, a sharp pain shot up my spine. These beings, the architects of humanity, had orders for me. I was to keep this knowledge hidden from the world, to maintain the secrecy that had veiled their existence.

In the days that followed, I was plagued by nightmarish visions and vivid dreams. I would wake in the dead of night, bathed in cold sweat, my mind haunted by unknown faces, cryptic symbols, and the deaths of millions of innocent people. It was as if they were watching me,

inspecting my thoughts, and instilling a sense of fear that was inescapable.

My nightmares soon gave way to a more sinister reality. I began to receive strange messages, encoded in symbols and patterns. They appeared in the most unexpected places – on my breakfast plate, etched into my bathroom mirror, and scrawled across the pages of classified documents. It was clearly a reminder of my obligation to stay in line. Even with their threats, I knew I needed to take action.

However, before I could even begin to think of a plan, the symbols, once mere abstractions, took on a more corporeal form. I would wake to find my body covered in intricate patterns, marked by an otherworldly force. I began seeing my own body more alike to the crop circles I saw back home than anything resembling that of a healthy human body. The pain that accompanied these markings was excruciating, a torture that left me gasping for breath each and every morning. It was a message from the beings, a painful reminder of the consequences of betraying their trust.

I became a puppet in their theater, a pawn in a game I could never comprehend. The walls of the Oval Office seemed to appear darker with each passing day, suffocating me with a truth never to be revealed.

As I write these words, I am no longer the man I once was. I am trapped in a nightmarish existence, humanity's chief prisoner. My campaign promise, to reveal the truth about UFOs, became a distant memory. Miraculously, as my hope dwindled, my body healed. The truth, as I have come to realize, is far more terrifying than I could have ever imagined, and I am to accept my new role, for anything else is certain death for who knows how many.



## Honorable Mention: "Twenty-Three" by Richard Townsley



Her body is in the trunk. It was what lawyers would call a "crime of passion": no premeditation, no malice, just rage. It's the same old story: boy meets girl, boy likes girl, girl likes boy, they get married, and he kills her with a dictionary. Her doing-in came via blunt force trauma—internal bleeding caused by *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*. There was little blood. She hardly even struggled! Real shame. She was pretty. And all over a dispute about leftovers.

Harry Lime, the perpetrator of this most heinous crime, feels something resembling regret, although he would be lying if he were to say it was not exhilarating. Every man fantasizes about murder at some point; only a select few follow through. Harry is one of those rare specimens. His plan is straightforward: dump the body in the lake and pray nobody asks him about his wife.

The lake is sixteen miles away. On a vacant night—like tonight—the drive is twenty-three minutes. Not terrible. He carefully places the body in the trunk, starts driving. Most men, when faced with such an exciting adventure, start acting irrationally. Harry, however, is not like most men. His job as a gas station attendant has taught him the virtues of patience and the names of 73 flavors of cigarette. All he must do is drive under the speed limit and avoid any unwanted attention.

The ride is quiet and dark. The only sounds are the humming of the engine, broken by the occasional rattling in the trunk. The only sights are that of the windshield devouring the asphalt and cars intermittently flashing their high beams into the driver's seat. The thirteenth minute passes; the silence is shattered by sirens. Slow to a stop. Watch in the rearview mirror as the state trooper exits his car and walks around the back. He stops to examine, places his hand flat on the trunk. He stays there looking down; roughly fifteen seconds pass before he

walks up to the window.

HARRY

"Officer, I was only going 35."

TROOPER

"This isn't about your speed."

HARRY

"..."

TROOPER

"License and registration."

Harry complies with his instructions. The cop walks him around the back, points at the problem. The taillight is broken—probably happened when he was throwing his beloved wife in the trunk. The state trooper orders it fixed immediately; he tells him—somewhat passive-aggressively—about a gas station just a mile away. They both get in their cars, start driving. The trooper follows. The next two minutes last forever. Harry turns on the radio station; it's jammed up with talk shows. Talk, talk, talk. The policeman's lights cut through the darkness and blind Harry in his rearview mirror. His message is clear. Harry complies, again. He pulls into the station.

The mechanic on duty looks at the car, makes a remark about how beautiful it is. He stares at the broken taillight, says it'll set Harry back about \$80. Stupid woman. Still draining his bank account even after death. The trooper has come to watch, sits down in the corner. Harry stands. The mechanic is somewhat disturbed by the audience. He looks at the taillight again before getting his toolbox out. He puts it on the trunk.

MECHANIC

"Open it."

HARRY

(not-so-calmly)

"Doesn't open."

The mechanic walks out, comes back with a crowbar. He is going to pry off the light. Harry watches, eyes wide. The state trooper pops open a soda. The mechanic carefully places the

crowbar in a groove under the light, pushes it down. The light pops off; the trunk pops open.

## Honorable Mention: "FUMM" by Aaron Miller

