

Hobbies Include Writing Halloween 2020 Episode

Poem by Ivie Montgomery. Originally published in Fredericksburg Literary and Arts Review, in their spring and summer 2018 issue. Their magazine sadly doesn't exist anymore, but people can still read it online.

<https://fredericksburg-literary-and-art-review.square.site/>

Witches

Once, when searching for my car
in a strange neighborhood
I felt a familiar calm.
It slowed me down and drew me
in, until I was at an old house,
with a roof that curved to a point
directly above the door.
Paned windows and straight-backed
beetroot walls
loomed over.

The lawn was golden-brown,
impaling.
A dandelion garden
waited
to be wishes.
Tiny metal ornaments hung from
the door and tresses.
The house was shadowed by trees
that sprinkled the lawn
and dusted the rooftops
with crumbling leaves.

As I watched the house, I thought,
Ah...
This is a witch's neighborhood.

I started back down the road and found
that all of the houses
were witch-houses.

I walked slowly, was it reverently?
Taking in the peeling shingles, the messy brick,
and I remembered.
I remembered the crumbling cement staircases,
the broken Fords in the driveways.
I remembered the large dogs chained to door-posts,
who'd snap and growl as strangers walked past.

This street was empty, but for a few dogs,
who growled as *I* passed.
But I imagine that in the evenings the street fills
with hairy men in tank tops and women
with half-dissolved teeth and yellowish, decaying skin,
which pulls back at the cheeks and flakes
until it's nothing.

They'll sit on their porches, smoking
and drinking Bud Light or Dos Equis,
chatting as the sun goes down.
They'll talk for hours about nothing,
while their kids roll in the leaves,
that crack beneath their backs
and tangle in their hair.

You could always tell a witch-house by the trees.
Ignore the barbed-wire fences,
rolling open on rusty wheels.
Ignore the broken toys abandoned on the lawn.
Instead, look for the spruce, the willow, maybe even an aspen,
unrestricted roots spreading out beneath cement.
Look for the plants—
the dandelion gardens, the pumpkin patches,
and the ivy, wrapping itself around the crooked walls,
until the house is no longer rusted orange brick,
but an earthy-green and red
and brown.

As I head back to my apartment,
I remember
picking dandelion
after dandelion, in an endless line,
which never seemed to run out.
I'd blow, and blow, and blow,
knowing that they only counted
if you got all of the seeds at once.
And when I'd managed it,
I'd close my eyes, and focus all of my
energy on that single wish.

Then I'd lay down in the grass
and feel the magic that resided there.

This poem is one I wrote from a place of dealing with mental health issues, and for my husband who has stood by me in those struggles.

Questing Euthymia

Those moments
When nothing really happens
Driving to the usual place
On the usual roads
Nothing going on but a great song

Snow over ice
Missing lights on rippling waters

The solitary feeling
A ghostly ache I clutch close
Not holding a single night to mind

Chilled glasses pressed
In hands that know each other
Rambling talks at 2 a.m.
When each word slips away

Time spent precious; on nothing
I cannot own
That peaceful euphoria,
That childish joy

I have lived a thousand of those moments
And taken every one for granted
I would die a thousand deaths
For one more to forget

So rarely do I feel
Nothing pressing at my skull
When the space inside is quiet
And at last alone is safe

I will live those times with you
Until my chest stops aching
Then leave me with
These memories to waste
Neglected, not lost

Short scripted story by E. Chris Garrison. You can find more of their work on the Alien Beer Podcast and at SillyHatBooks.com.

Spreading Wings

By E. Chris Garrison

GINNY: "John, what are these lumps on Millie's back?"

JOHN: "Huh? Those are her shoulder blades, Ginny."

GINNY: "No, I mean the lumps on her shoulder blades! Are you even looking?"

JOHN: "Ginny, I'm trying to watch... Oh God, what is going on there?"

GINNY: "Should we take her to the doctor?"

MILLIE (7-year-old girl): "Mommy, stop, they itch! I don't wanna to go to the doctor."

JOHN: "Ginny, is that one moving?"

MILLIE: "Mommy, it hurts!"

GINNY: "Oh holy mother of—John, her skin's splitting!"

JOHN: "I can see that. Let me in there. Is that a feather?"

GINNY: "Blue feathers! That's--"

JOHN: "—impossible, Ginny! And the other one's splitting too! She's not bleeding, but--"

MILLIE: "Mommy, Daddy, what's happening to me?"

* * *

BRENDA: Brenda stroked the iridescent blue feathers of Millie's wings. "They're beautiful! How long have you had them?"

MILLIE: "They erupted a week before my 8th birthday. Dad canceled my pool party because he couldn't think of a way to hide them. For years, I got out of gym class because my parents were so afraid of anyone knowing I was different like that." She stretched the wings to their full ten-foot span, shading her girlfriend and their picnic spread from the summer sun.

BRENDA: "But now?"

MILLIE: "Well, my high school boyfriend blabbed to his friends, and then the whole school wanted to see them, so one day after school, I just let them loose." Millie's wings fanned Brenda with a gentle breeze. "I was the school freak."

BRENDA: Brenda smiled and shook her head. "You're not a freak to me. You're gorgeous. You're amazing! I love them so much!"

MILLIE: Millie smiled and folded her wings back up, close against her back. "I'm so glad. They're a deal breaker more often than you'd think. And I've had too many dates with guys who just wanted to 'score with an angel' for bragging rights. It's humiliating to be just a trophy screw to someone."

BRENDA: Brenda traced a finger up and down Millie's arm. "I've stuck around. You know you're so much more than that to me." Her finger ended up across Millie's lips. She drew close for a kiss.

MILLIE: Millie turned to one side, staring off into the distance. "I know. Can we just... talk about something else?"

* * *

BRENDA: "Oh, come on, Millie! It's just for one night!"

MILLIE: "No. No! I won't cover them up, Brenda. I won't do it to save my parents respectability and I won't do it for yours either, Brenda!"

BRENDA: "Sweetie, it's not about that. I just... I mean, I can't... I could, you know, lose my job!"

MILLIE: "You could lose your job for dating a freak, you mean?"

BRENDA: "Honey, no. It's not like that. Not at all! I just don't want to stand out, I don't want my personal life mixed up with my work life."

MILLIE: "So, don't bring me at all, then!"

BRENDA: "Millie-- okay, fine, if that's how you feel about it, I'll tell them that you're sick and couldn't make it."

MILLIE: "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

BRENDA: "That's not fair!"

MILLIE: "Isn't it, Brenda? Isn't it? You're asking me to cover up something you tell me is a beautiful part of me, and if I refuse, you're going to lie to your co-workers to maintain that fake little normal image you want them to have of you." She unfolded her wings in defiance, knocking over a lamp in their living room in the process.

BRENDA: "You are so impossible! That's not it at all!"

MILLIE: "Just go without me. I'll find something else to do."

* * *

MILLIE: "Brenda, they're not tumors." Millie traced one of the lumps on her girlfriend's back.

BRENDA: Brenda wiped at the tears staining her face. "Let's just go to Urgent Care. Maybe they can tell us. Take an ultrasound, maybe?"

MILLIE: Millie kept her voice as calm and gentle as possible. "We already know what they are, sweetheart." She bent her wings forward and around Brenda, like a protective cocoon.

BRENDA: Brenda batted them away and stood up, walking a few paces away from Millie. She turned and began to cry all over again. "How did this happen? Can you be con-contagious somehow?"

MILLIE: Millie gasped and fluttered her wings in frustration. Receipts and sticky notes swirled in the chaotic gusts of air around her. "Contagious! So, I'm a disease to you now?"

BRENDA: "N-no, that's not what I'm s-saying! I love your w-wings, I just c-can't--"

MILLIE: "Can't be turning into a freak too?"

BRENDA: Brenda waved her arms, hands balled into fists. "Stop it, just stop it! This isn't about you!"

MILLIE: "You made it about me!"

BRENDA: "I'm sorry, okay? You've had all your life to get used to having wings. All I have had to do so far is to get used to people looking at you, at us as we go out in public when you show them."

MILLIE: Millie's eyes narrowed. "When we go out in public and I don't hide my wings, you mean. How embarrassing it must be for you. Imagine how it feels for me when even the love of my life won't be seen with me, the real me, all of me!"

BRENDA: "It was just that one company holiday dinner, when I—Ugh, ow, it hurts!" Brenda bent at her middle and cried out as her skin split and damp purple feathers sprouted from inside.

MILLIE: Millie let out a sob and rushed to hold her girlfriend. She stroked her skin with the gentlest of touches, brushed her dark hair out of her face and lifted her chin to peer into her deep brown eyes. "It's going to be okay, love. It's going to be different, and you're going to attract attention, but it's okay. It has to be. This is you, now, like it's been me for so long."

BRENDA: Brenda's lip quivered, and she didn't dare speak. But she looked back into Millie's green eyes and nodded.

MILLIE: Millie smiled and touched Brenda's cheek. "And I think people will love you all the more, once they see."

BRENDA: "I hope so."

This next & final story is one of my own creation. Vaguely inspired by The Magnus Archives, which is an excellent horror podcast by Rusty Quill Productions. I highly recommend you go listen to that and frankly all of the content they create is excellent.

Long Distance Runner

Statement by Macey Blavenshire, recorded October 30, 2019

I hate running. I know a lot of people who work out really get into a "runner's high". My husband certainly does. He runs five miles every day. He's actually the one who got me into working out regularly, about four years ago shortly after we met. I never had to when I was younger; I grew up on a farm and did theatre for most of high school, so there was never a lack of physical activity. I didn't have time for that in college, though, and a lot of late night study eating combined with no sleep, stress...let's just say the "freshman fifteen" turned into the college 30 by the time I graduated.

Don't get me wrong, I don't mind exercising. I'll always be sort of big-boned and thick-thighed. I like my body. But it doesn't hurt to work out every day to keep myself healthy. It helps my mind settle at the start of each day. I do a lot of bodyweight training and yoga. I even bike in the summer when it's warm enough out. But I struggle with running. It's just so miserable, constant pounding on your joints. Growing up throwing 60lb hay bales from the time you can walk will give you aches and pains a lot younger than most people get them. Not to mention my cardio endurance has never been great.

I struggle with anxiety, too, and cardio is sort of a double-edged sword for me. The endorphins help with my depression but every time I get my heart rate up my brain thinks it's a good time for an anxiety attack. At least, it used to, when I first started working out. I eventually trained my brain that an accelerated heart rate doesn't mean I'm in danger. But running, that long-term endurance...it just sucks, if I'm being honest.

So I'm always looking for new ways to break plateaus and stay motivated to get my cardio in. I've tried just about everything. You'd be surprised how many running apps there are and as many different types of programs to get your ass moving. Have you heard of those Zombie ones? The horror running apps that tell you you're being chased and you have to outrun the monster? Obviously I steer clear of that sort of thing, since I've worked so hard learning not to panic when I'm working out. Before I go on I want to be clear that this wasn't one of those.

The app was called "Endure". That's it, very simple. The icon was simple, too. Just a little green stick figure in a running position on a black background. I tend to prefer a simple aesthetic in workout apps. Fancy ones just make me feel self-conscious, I'm not sure why. The app had about ten thousand downloads and a decent rating. I didn't look too deep into the reviews since it was free. The description was short and straightforward, if a little strange. It said:

"Endurance. Run longer than you ever thought possible. You. will. run."

Like I said, a little odd, but workout programs can be tongue in cheek like that sometimes. I kind of like that attitude. I hate the peppy ones. You know, where some blonde supermodel with zero percent body fat smiles and cheerleads at you during the workout, meanwhile I'm sweating like a pig and feel like my heart is going to rip out of my chest.

Anyway. I downloaded the app. It only had one program, which was a little disappointing, but it seemed like it would work. Sort of an interval program with walking, jogging and running designed to build your endurance over time. Besides, by the time I realized there was only one program I had to get moving or I wasn't going to get a full workout in before work. I popped my headphones in and started the guided audio. I usually listen to my own music or a podcast or something when I'm running or biking. A lot of the apps will let you do that, play your own background audio and just chime in whenever they need to cue you to speed up or slow down. This one didn't. It had its own music.

Well, I say music. Really it was some sort of drumming. Like a flat, repetitive slapping sound, not any kind of drum I've heard before. There wasn't a lot of complexity or variety, but it was a good tempo to move along to, I suppose. And like I said, I needed to get moving.

Then there was the voice. It had some kind of an accent, British maybe? It was a little more realistic than those AI voices on GPS and smart home systems...but not by much. And I couldn't tell if it was masculine or feminine or somewhere in between. It started out pretty normal. The voice instructed me to warm up at a walk for a few minutes, then jog for 90 seconds, then a short walking break of 30 seconds. It went back and forth like that a couple of times, and the drums changed tempo along with the pace. I found myself falling into step with it pretty easily.

I don't know how long into it but...something changed. It was after a short walking break. The drums just stopped for a second. I stumbled, I had been so in tune with them. I thought for a second that maybe I'd lost signal and the program wasn't downloading right. Before I could take my phone out to check, I heard the voice in my ear again. But, this time it was...different. It had a different tone. Like it wasn't some disembodied, pre-recorded AI voice in my head phones, even though it was the same exact voice. It felt like someone standing very close to my ear...only on both sides of me, or...maybe inside my head? It didn't get any louder, it just felt...closer. And it wasn't like some neutral suggestion or guidance the way the others had been. No, this was a command.

“Now, run.”

That’s what it said. The drums started up again and I was moving immediately. I hadn’t even thought. I just started running, like my foot hit the ground at the very first drum beat and kept going. The drums were a lot faster than before and within a few seconds I could feel the muscles in my legs protesting but somehow I didn’t have any trouble keeping up. After about...I don’t know, 30 seconds? 15?...the voice started the countdown. Most apps do that during a tougher interval. They let you know how much time is left every so often. It’s a mental thing.

I’m not an expert on the psychology of exercise or anything, but I think it’s something about your mental endurance. See, the body can’t handle doing anything indefinitely, especially if it’s stressful or painful. So if the mind doesn’t think there’s any end in sight...it’s mind over matter, and your mind just can’t see the point in an endless task with no reward. It’s not about boredom, it’s a kind of torture on top of the physical pain, for something to feel endless. So, these programs keep reminding you how much time is left, and your brain can push through the pain because it knows there is a rest - a reward coming in x amount of minutes or seconds.

The voice said, “5 minutes remaining”. That’s a pretty long running interval, for me anyways. But I figured I would push through as long as I could and if I ended up walking the last 30 seconds, well I would push harder the next time. So I’m sweating and my legs are burning and my feet are slapping the pavement and my bum knee is starting to twinge a bit. And the voice is chiming in every 60 seconds with the countdown.

“Four minutes remaining...three minutes...”

Just before it hits the two minute mark, I decided I needed a break. I mentally decided that on the next voice cue I would take a short break and then try to pick back up and run the rest of the way. But when the next countdown came...

“Two minutes remaining. Keep running.”

The voice was different, again. Closer and commanding and...I didn’t stop. My arms just kept pumping and my feet kept slapping on the ground. Everything in my muscles was screaming to stop or at least slow down. But I couldn’t. I tried, I really did. But I just couldn’t seem to break from the rhythm of those drums. I felt...odd. And it hurt. But...I thought maybe some part of my brain had unlocked, some sort of untapped motivation, like a part of me really wanted to finish out the interval even though the rest of me wanted nothing more than to rest.

I was relieved when the one minute mark came. I figured I was almost done. I hadn’t started to panic yet. The thirty second mark hit, and I began counting down inside my head. My internal clock isn’t the most accurate, but it helps me push through sometimes if I do my own little countdown. A few seconds after I reached zero, I expected to hear a cue to walk or jog. But instead...

“30 seconds remaining.”

What the hell? I thought maybe I misheard, the last mark must have been a minute, but I could have sworn... I kept going, counting down again...and again, and each time...

“30 seconds remaining.”

Now I was thinking that maybe it was a glitch, that I kept losing connection and the program was jumping back to the last cue. So I decided to stop, check my phone and skip ahead to the walking interval or even finish out on my own if I needed to. Except I didn't. I decided to stop, but I didn't...stop. I just...kept going. And every so often that cue came again.

"30 seconds remaining."

I thought the word, "Stop!" louder and louder in my head, commanding my body to stop and rest but it didn't. By then my muscles were screaming, every impact of my feet on the pavement felt like a tire iron pounding my joints. My lungs were on fire, my heart was aching in my chest. I tried to reach for the phone in my pocket as I ran, but I couldn't pull my arms out of their rhythm, pumping back and forth along with the flap, flap, flap of the drums. I tried to be logical, tried to take a deep breath to calm down, but all I got was a strange, desperate gasp. Even my lungs were pumping along to the drum beat.

I tried counting again, this time upwards from zero. I got all the way to one hundred and fifty before the cue came.

"30 seconds remaining."

I wanted to cry. I didn't understand what was happening, why I couldn't stop. I looked down at my legs, pounding down one after the other, slamming into the cracked blacktop. I couldn't get enough of a deep breath to yell properly, but I tried anyway. I wheezed out as loud as I could manage, screaming at my legs, "STOP!"

I don't know exactly how much time had gone by. It must have been a while, because the sun was fully beating on my back. It must have been 80 degrees outside. But what I heard the voice say next made my blood run ice cold.

"No, Mace. Run."

Mace. Not Macey, but Mace. The app hadn't required a username, but even if it had automatically snatched it from my online accounts, I NEVER use that nickname online. My husband is the only one who calls me that. Sure, he's done it around enough electronics in our home, and I know they say those things are always listening, but...It felt so creepy. So personal. Like this voice inside my head knew me.

After that, the cues became even less frequent. Eventually they stopped altogether. I couldn't tell how much time was passing, exactly. At some point I noticed my shadow had shifted from in front of me to behind me. It was just me, and the drums, and the street underneath my pounding feet. The flapping of my shoes against the hard surface blended into the flat sounding drums until I couldn't tell which was which anymore. After a while I was so covered in sweat that I felt like I'd been pushed in a pool fully clothed. My muscles screamed at me, and my chest hurt, and my lungs breathed ice and fire, and I just. Couldn't. Stop.

After a while, again I don't know how much time exactly, my legs lost all feeling except for my bad knee, which felt like there was a knife stuck in it being twisted with every step. But still I couldn't change my pace. I even tried going faster at one point just for some fucking variety but I couldn't break from that endless, flat drumming sound. I don't remember turning left or right on any streets, which is...well it seems impossible. See, I was just running in the little town where I live. It's fairly rural and it can't be more than a mile across in any direction...maybe two?

I couldn't even turn my head to look at the houses going by. But I knew they were. Like, whatever was happening I wasn't running in place. For one thing I could see the cracks in the pavement changing under my feet, and out of the corners of my eyes I could see the scenery going by. But I never reached the end of town. Looking back on it...it would make a good song, or a sick, twisted metaphor; running endlessly through the streets of suburbia, getting nowhere.

I couldn't understand why no one was coming up to stop me or say hi or ask if I was ok. I know I must have looked like hell, we live in a fairly small neighborhood like I said and pretty much everyone knows each other. The police report said no one they questioned remembers seeing me go on my usual run that morning. I...I don't know.

There aren't words for the depth of that agony. Not the physical agony, although there was that, too. Especially when my muscles regained sensation and felt like they were tearing away from each other...away from my bones. But that was just part of the whole thing.

What was the whole thing? Despair. Remember what I said about the importance of telling the brain that the pain is going to end? Well, at some point, I lost that hope...I lost all hope that it would end. It felt like the pain had gone on forever, and that it would continue to go on forever. I felt that I had been running for eternity. The only things that existed were the flat pounding of the drums and my feet, the scorching heat of the sun on my skin, and the waves of wrenching, tearing pain in every part of my body. I wasn't even sure that I existed anymore, that I had ever existed. All I was, was the experience of running in agony forever.

You know the feeling when you were a kid, and you felt like you could run forever with the wind in your face, like you were flying? This was like the antichrist - no, not the antithesis, I know what I said - it was the antichrist of that feeling. It was enslavement and despair and agony spreading out in every direction across space and time, into infinity.

The brain doesn't like monotony, even if it is a monotony of high level stress and pain. Maybe that's why I remembered suddenly, at some point, that I could die. No, I knew I was going to die. I mean, I know the body is capable of doing amazing things when it has no choice but...it can't run for eternity. I did cry when I remembered that, with relief. I cried a couple times. Until I was too dehydrated, I guess. I figured I would just be running until my heart gave out or I had a stroke. I lost all sense of time, and begged for something to end it, to let me stop...anything... even death. But at least for a while I was confident that it would end.

Until even that hope faded, and I knew I must already be in hell. After that, I don't remember thinking much. Just feeling, mental despair and physical agony. Not existing even. Just running.

I started my run at 6 in the morning. They didn't find me until after 5p.m. that night. My husband starts work a little later than I do and he gets the kid ready for school usually and...well, our morning routine doesn't exactly match up. He figured he must have just missed me leave for work somehow. And he tried texting me a few times throughout the day but I guess he thought maybe I was pissed at him or just having a bad day or maybe I left my phone at home. None of the texts came through, at least not until later.

Anyway, it wasn't until I missed picking our kid up and the school called him that he really started to get worried. It was the police that found me. For as long as I had been running, I hadn't gone very far. I

was apparently on my back in a drainage ditch, about half a mile from home. They had to wait for the paramedics to arrive. I had to be restrained, I guess...I don't remember. They said...well, they said I was still moving. Extremely dehydrated and overheated and apparently delirious. They even found out later that I had torn several muscles to the point of needing surgical repair, and said it was a miracle I didn't have a heart attack... but when they found me I was still pumping my arms and legs...like I was still trying to run, laying there...on my back like...like a...beetle or something.

My phone had died at some point before they found me. I don't know what time my wireless headphones must have died, they usually have a battery life of about...four hours max. But I don't remember that the drumming ever stopped, not until I woke up in the hospital. Or maybe it had and I just didn't notice because it had blended with the sound of my footsteps so well...god knows I must have been dehydrated and overheated enough to start hallucinating by whatever point I collapsed in that ditch.

They said I didn't stop moving until they got me in the ambulance. They even strapped me down and sedated me but I kept...trying to run until one of the paramedics pulled my headphones out of my ears...like I said, the batteries were already long dead by that point, but...

They called it a PTSD episode. That the running must have triggered an anxiety attack and some sort of primal response to my traumatic memories but...I've had anxiety attacks during workouts. I know how to deal with them and I know what they feel like and I don't give a damn what they say, but that's not what happened. I don't know what the hell that app was, hypnosis or mind control or something more...supernatural, but...

Well, try convincing anyone else of that. Especially when I can't find any trace of the app anywhere. Not on my phone, not in my download history, not on any of the app stores...I even had an...well, an ethical anarchist computer geek friend of mine poke around in some of their...circles but no one has ever heard of the damn thing. It's been over a year and no one can find any trace of it anywhere.

I'm still going to physical therapy and I've started gentle workouts but...I don't think I will be running anytime soon, even after the doctor clears me. Certainly not with headphones in. And I'm done with guided workout programs altogether. Whatever that shit was...I'd rather...well I don't know what I'd rather, but I'm not risking it again.