

# HANDBASKET

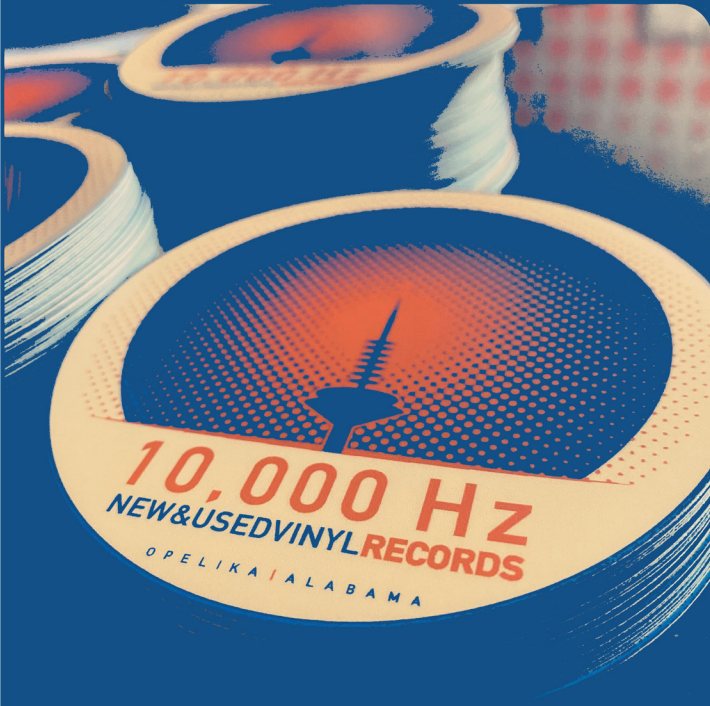
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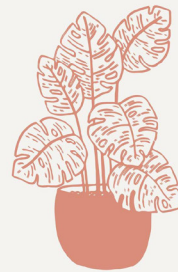
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ISSUE #19: SCARY STORIES

## and now a word from the editor



**L**ike for many gay people, Halloween is my favorite holiday and time of the year. The air is chillier, people dress up in costumes, monsters are celebrated, people decorate their home and work spaces with scary things, horror movies are at the forefront of pop culture, folks pass out candy to trick-or-treaters, and everyone is just a little bit on edge.

Why do queer people love Halloween so much? It's been ruminated that we find connection in monsters, having been compared to them throughout our lives by our enemies. Some love the campy value of the horror genre, finding the thrill of adrenaline within fear packaged in over-the-top costumes and dialogue. Others simply love any reason to dress up in however much (or little) as they like. It takes all kinds!

In the spirit of the season, I asked contributors to share scary stories of their own for this issue. Within these pages, you'll read about possession, an eldritch horror from the depths, ever-present ancestral spirits, and a late night home invasion. Hopefully, they don't keep you awake all night. Even then, you might want to sleep with a light on.

I'd also like to thank Alvin, this issue's front cover model. He was *Handbasket*'s first "back cover model" and was kind enough to model for the zine again. Alvin is amazing! Thanks so much! He can be found on Instagram [@hypanthiun](#).

*Forever yours, - Taylor B. 🔥*

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*Handbasket* is a free bimonthly literary zine dedicated to sharing LGBTQ+ narratives.

Content is accepted from LGBTQ+ writers of various backgrounds and intersections.

Don't take this zine too seriously; nobody involved does.

Board of Directors: Carlos Frank-Estrada | Christopher Sommer | Hollis Zepp

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# We Were Once Possessed

by J.L. Comes

It was a night like any other  
Until you spoke in tongues  
Fidgeted, spasmed, stuttered  
And I felt dumb, not knowing what to do

I sat at your side, shuddered  
While you kept up the act  
'Til you told me to call her—  
The friend with a knack for speaking Angel.

I still don't believe it.  
How could it be true  
That the demon inside  
Was a gift from God to you?

I waited for the end  
For your sounds to subside  
Thrashing, gnashing, mumbling  
Quieted down until I thought you'd died.

You acted as though nothing happened...  
How nice it must be to live in delusion.  
In conclusion: it was then my love for you  
Began to abandon me;

What a blessing!  
We were both no longer possessed  
By that which made us crazy.



**J.L. Comes** (he/they) is a Queer Adult/YA Fantasy & SciFi writer and Poet originally from the small southern town of Portsmouth, VA.

Along with a BA in Music and Theatre from Coastal Carolina University, his life experiences of cancer, religious trauma, body dysmorphia, neurodivergence and more influence all aspects of his writing.

Now residing in Los Angeles, CA as a SAG-AFTRA Actor, you can find him performing in local theatre or in the background of one your favorite TV shows.

# Alone on a Boat: A Lyrical Horror

The sea has always been a cruel lover.

by Timothy Arliss OBrien

On mornings when the mist rises off the water like a spectral veil,  
I walk from my little bungalow to the docks just west of downtown  
and find my little fishing vessel: shrouded in the early morning haze.

I always steer my boat toward the horizon.  
It's more quiet in that direction, just the soft breath of the ocean against my aged wooden hull.

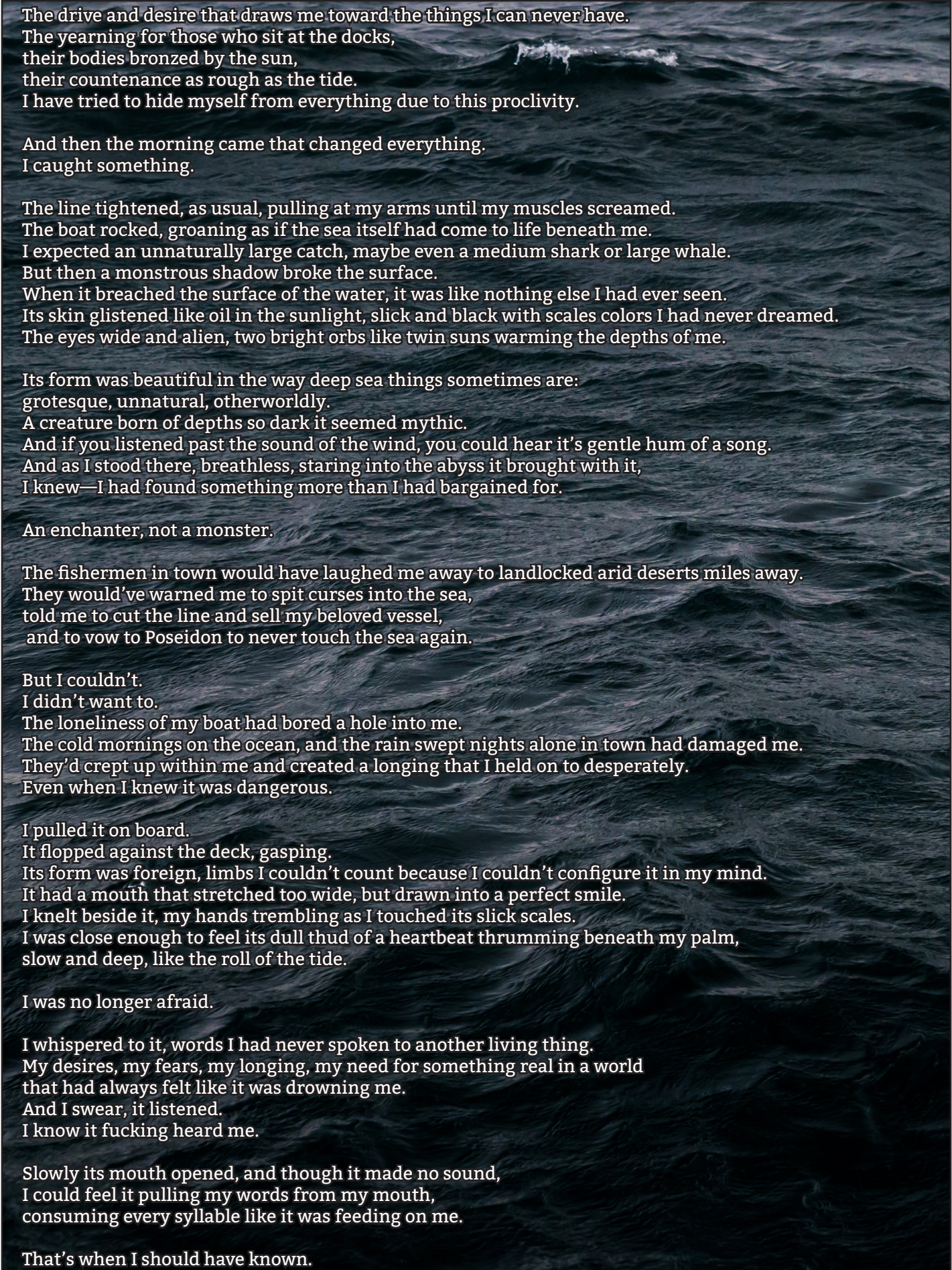
I have learned that silence although a reassurance can be a kind of warning.  
And unfortunately I, out of all people, have learned that behind still waters,  
Sometimes monsters lie waiting.

My life has always belonged to the sea.  
The fishermen in town say the water is in our blood,  
a shared inheritance from ancestors who were never around long enough to love us properly.

So we learn to yearn for the sea instead of yearn for love.  
We learn to cast our hopes, pull in on baited breath,  
and pray to the old sea gods that something—anything—will rise from the deep  
and give us reason to come back another morning.

But that early light of day often grants us seafarers secrets.  
Secrets like the hunger.





The drive and desire that draws me toward the things I can never have.  
The yearning for those who sit at the docks,  
their bodies bronzed by the sun,  
their countenance as rough as the tide.  
I have tried to hide myself from everything due to this proclivity.

And then the morning came that changed everything.  
I caught something.

The line tightened, as usual, pulling at my arms until my muscles screamed.  
The boat rocked, groaning as if the sea itself had come to life beneath me.  
I expected an unnaturally large catch, maybe even a medium shark or large whale.  
But then a monstrous shadow broke the surface.  
When it breached the surface of the water, it was like nothing else I had ever seen.  
Its skin glistened like oil in the sunlight, slick and black with scales colors I had never dreamed.  
The eyes wide and alien, two bright orbs like twin suns warming the depths of me.

Its form was beautiful in the way deep sea things sometimes are:  
grotesque, unnatural, otherworldly.  
A creature born of depths so dark it seemed mythic.  
And if you listened past the sound of the wind, you could hear it's gentle hum of a song.  
And as I stood there, breathless, staring into the abyss it brought with it,  
I knew—I had found something more than I had bargained for.

An enchanter, not a monster.

The fishermen in town would have laughed me away to landlocked arid deserts miles away.  
They would've warned me to spit curses into the sea,  
told me to cut the line and sell my beloved vessel,  
and to vow to Poseidon to never touch the sea again.

But I couldn't.  
I didn't want to.  
The loneliness of my boat had bored a hole into me.  
The cold mornings on the ocean, and the rain swept nights alone in town had damaged me.  
They'd crept up within me and created a longing that I held on to desperately.  
Even when I knew it was dangerous.

I pulled it on board.  
It flopped against the deck, gasping.  
Its form was foreign, limbs I couldn't count because I couldn't configure it in my mind.  
It had a mouth that stretched too wide, but drawn into a perfect smile.  
I knelt beside it, my hands trembling as I touched its slick scales.  
I was close enough to feel its dull thud of a heartbeat thrumming beneath my palm,  
slow and deep, like the roll of the tide.

I was no longer afraid.

I whispered to it, words I had never spoken to another living thing.  
My desires, my fears, my longing, my need for something real in a world  
that had always felt like it was drowning me.  
And I swear, it listened.  
I know it fucking heard me.

Slowly its mouth opened, and though it made no sound,  
I could feel it pulling my words from my mouth,  
consuming every syllable like it was feeding on me.

That's when I should have known.



But I didn't stop. I couldn't.  
I loved it, as only a lonely man can love a thing that has no name.  
I loved it because it was strange, because it was alien and unknowable, and because it was mine.  
I had caught it, and in doing so, I had made it a part of me.

I hurriedly made my way to one of my favorite enclaves.  
Somewhere rocky enough that other fisherman dared not tread.  
But with the reinforced understructure of my vessel  
I had confidently been fishing the rocky tides there for years.  
I kept it there. A prisoner of my own longing.

I visited it daily. We spent the hours entwined,  
its body wrapping around mine in ways that no man ever could.  
There were times when I thought I felt it sink into my skin,  
pressing against my bones like the weight of the ocean itself.  
But I didn't care. I told myself it was love.

I had always heard stories about sailors who went mad,  
who claimed the sea had taken their minds.  
But this was different. The monster was not in the water anymore.  
It was in my chest, curling tighter every day, sinking its teeth into my heart.

One afternoon after having fallen asleep on the shore entangled with it as always,  
I awoke to the sound of its breathing—slow, measured.  
I reached out, but my fingers found only the cold, damp sand beneath me.  
Then, I felt a sharpness. A sudden stabbing pain that shot through my chest.  
I gasped, choking on the air that suddenly felt too thick.  
Was I drowning?  
My hands flew to my chest, and I felt it—a gaping hole, the edges slick and raw.

It had taken my heart.  
I was feeling myself drain away quicker and quicker by the moment.

I took what little energy I had left to lift my head  
and squint through my ever growing blurry vision.

I watched it, my lover, slither away, into the dark waters, leaving me hollow. Empty.

As the sun set and the world grew cold I realized that this had always been the fate of a  
fisherman like me—destined to love something wild, something that could never be tamed.  
We cast our nets, not for what we can keep, but for what will eventually devour us.

I still love it, even now.  
Even with my heart gone,  
because it was better to feel wanted and to give myself to something,  
than to spend all of my days alone  
on my boat.



**T**imothy Arliss OBrien is a classical music composer and poetry publisher. He hosts and manages the podcast and small press publisher *The Poet Heroic* along with its metaphysics imprint, the spell creating and tarot publishing *Healers Coven*, and the music podcast *Composers Breathing*.



# Tiene Aitu Ma Tagata

by Lizzy Paulson

**G**rowing up *afakasi*, I knew two things were certain: I am deeply loved by my *aiga* and I had to keep my hair up at night. No matter what. Why? Because my long dark *lauulu*, cascading freely down my back, disrespects the *aitu*.

*Aitu* are all around us. *Aitu* are spirits or supernatural entities. Good or bad. Human, at some point human or not. Though *aitu* are most concentrated in Samoa, they are not static. *Aitu* are sometimes ancestors who painfully loved us in life and refuse to leave us in death.

In American Samoa, the graves of our ancestors are all around us. By the front door, the church, and convenience stores. A walk to get taro and *fa'i* is also visiting time with your deceased relatives. If they weren't already strolling with you anyway. Even back home in Seattle, they were present. A figure in the corner or by the side of the house. They seemed to follow. Watch. Listen.

I heard my mother's panicked voice when she spoke about the *aitu*. She would burn frankincense and myrrh and say a Hail Mary to send our ancestors back home to *moe* and rest. Before the time of the first colonizers forced their way to the shores of Pago Pago, our people praised our ancestors. Or ask them for help. We were one with them. But with tough times came tough choices. Survival dictates that you do what you must, like convert to Christianity. Or else. In that same vein, we didn't worship those who came before us. We were aware of their existence.

I grew up knowing to love my ancestors, I also knew not to transgress them. I was not to clap at night. Whistle. I had to cover the mirrors. But I was especially not to wear a flower in my hair at night. Nope. That is an insult to those who were before you and results in a slap in the face. Yes, if my ancestors thought I was trying to be prettier than them, they would slap me. What I felt I would not call fear, but I did feel anxious and apprehensive.

When it was time to accompany my grandmother to her island to settle paperwork for one of the properties she was selling, I was at the very least nervous. I have white skin and do not follow the *fa'asamoa*, the Samoan way of life, perfectly. A meticulous system of land and language. Of place and practice. Of *matai*, chiefs, and charity. The *fa'asamoa* is powerful and thousands of years old. I am hopelessly American. I am *afakasi palagi*. I am Samoan and white. Would my ancestors not accept me? Would horrible luck follow me if I spoke out of turn? Would *aitu* punish me?

Getting up at three o'clock in the morning for a seven o'clock flight is almost a rite of passage in a Samoan family. Several cardboard boxes wrapped tightly in silver duct tape guided us in. We knew a group of people both

*continued on page 10*



THE

**HANDBASKET**

INTERVIEW





**name | age/sex/location | pronouns**

Bryan – 31/Male/Anaheim, CA – He/Him/His

**what are three words that summarize you?**

Passionate, Caring, Welcoming.

**how would your friends describe you?**

Will give you the shirt off of my back and then read both of us at the same time.

**what is a big goal you're working towards (or have already achieved)?**

I'm riding in the AIDS/LifeCycle in 2025! Riding a bike 545 miles from SF to LA to raise money and awareness for HIV/AIDS research and resources through the SF AIDS Foundation and the LA LGBT Center.

**do you collect anything?**

Alcohol from around the country/world and memories.

**your idea of happiness is?**

A night out surrounded by the ones that I love.

**describe your aesthetic.**

Hipster and grunge Pacific NW or athletic wear.

**what is a topic you're always up to talk about?**

The internet's latest trends (currently Moo Deng).

**what is a pet peeve of yours?**

Not remembering someone's spelling of their name.

**recommend three songs.**

Björk - "All is Full of Love" | Charli xcx - "B2b" | Richard Harris - "MacArthur Park"

**good advice to give?**

Don't sweat the petty things, and don't pet the sweaty things, unless with consent! 🔥

Scan the QR code to donate  
to Bryan's AIDS/LifeCycle  
page and learn more about  
this amazing fundraiser.  
(The code is valid until June 2025.)



working and flying with us, which wasn't planned. As we waited to board, my anxiety began to rise.

I felt sick on our flight to Hawai'i. My grandmother sat calmly next to me, sipping tea. This is a journey she has taken dozens of times: starting with her first trip in 1960 and then dozens and times after that. My grandmother could not stay away from home for long.

This is only my second time going to American Samoa, the first time, I was nine years old. No one had expectations of me. Or nor I had of myself.

This time I am running scenarios over and over again in my head: of possession, breaking out in boils, and feeling a burning sense of not belonging in a place I was brought up to be proud of. The small blue seats aided my uncomfortableness as I shifted from side to side. It was a restless flight. It was a restless layover. Then it was time for another restless leg on our journey.

Through turbulence and a night, my grandmother and I finally arrived in Pago Pago, American Samoa. I keep a watchful eye on my grandmother as she carefully steps down the stairs. She was seventy-six at the time but walked confidently. This was her island. Depending on who you ask, I was either a guest or a colonizer. I balanced our carrycots while I grabbed the handrail and waddled on the tarmac. The humidity made it hard to breathe, but the social pressure was suffocating.

American Samoa is not haunted. It is alive with ancestors. My mortality is not called into question here. Here, *tofa*, goodbye, is not forever.





But that doesn't mean the pains of the past are forgotten.

What do my ancestors think of the *palagi* invading their shores?

The Governor ordered my family to dig up our ancestors buried in canoes in hopes that the poltergeist activity would stop on *Mauga o Ali'i*, the Mountain of Chief, where the United States Navy forced my family to lease their land for one dollar a year for one hundred years and some corned beef. Will an island holding onto her fleeting past be able to welcome me, even though I am a product of her oppressor?

But I am a product of Samoa's teachings as well.

The legacy that I have been given and am proud to bear.

Would they not welcome me?

My grandmother and I were picked up by relatives and drove through the dark. It was nearing midnight. A pack of dogs sniffed and trotted along with us as we got from the car to my aunt's house. As I sat on a mat on the floor with my cousins, I committed my first transgression. I was excited to have someone my age to talk to. But I was talking too loud. The elders seated at the dining room table stopped chatting to stare at us. My cousin whispered a "sorry." I felt my face grow red. I had not been on this island for more than an hour, and I was already being disrespectful. This was it. My end. I hoped the *aitu* could forgive me.

The first night I slept in a queen-sized bed, a red comforter bought at a swap meet sent from the States lay loosely over me. The air was heavy, and my breathing was labored, the thick air gathering at the back of my throat as I tried to rest. I was sleeping a dreamless nothing when the softest of touches brushed my exposed cheek. The force felt the shape of my face, gently waking me. My heart pounded as I gasped awake. I looked over at my grandmother, who was contently sleeping on the other side of the bed. Then the church bell rang. It was six o'clock in the morning and I knew why I was awakened. My grandmother would later claim her father's spirit had awakened me. I think she might have been right.

Despite my fears, my worries, and my looks. My ancestors welcomed me. They love me. I was content with where I was. Though I wanted to go back to sleep, it was time for morning prayer and I needed to get ready. Maybe it was I who needed to be accepting and welcome newness.

We Samoans are an unapologetically forgiving people. I was accepted and loved. I am *tiene aitu ma tagata*, the girl of ghosts and people. 🔥



**Elizabeth Anne Mailo "Lizzy" Paulson** is a Samoan, South Seattleite writer and poet. Lizzy finds her voice in experiences with her *aiga*, healing transgenerational trauma, and blooming for herself and her community. To follow Lizzy on her creative journey (including a new *Pasifika* horror short story collection), you can find updates on Instagram [@lizzy\\_amp](https://www.instagram.com/lizzy_amp).

# Untitled

by Dax Thomas

In 2008, my parents moved into a new neighborhood on the outskirts of Guthrie, Oklahoma. The neighborhood was nice, but isolated — there was nothing for miles once you drove out of the entrance. They were the first to live in their house, a beautiful home with a layout where the master suite was on one end, while the other bedrooms were on the opposite side, with the living area, kitchen and office centrally located.

At the time, I was attending the University of Central Oklahoma, so I'd often visit for a home-cooked meal, to do laundry, or just get a break from the university for a night or two. Shortly after they moved in, my parents started mentioning hearing strange noises coming from the far side of the house. My dad and I are both big paranormal nerds, so we'd joke about the house being haunted. My mom didn't appreciate our jokes though — she seemed uneasy about it.

That October, I went home for a long weekend during fall break. All my friends had gone home, so I decided to do the same thing, figuring a few days away would be relaxing. After arriving on Wednesday, I settled into the guest room, hooked up my Xbox 360 to the TV, and played some games until my dad got home from work. Later, while we were having dinner, we heard a loud crash from the guest room, like something heavy had fallen over. I got up to check, but everything was in place — nothing had fallen over. When I came back to the table, my dad said, "That's what we've been hearing. It happens randomly. I've checked

the attic, the walls — nothing is out of place." My mom's only response was, "Just ignore it."

We finished dinner, and though I was spooked, I tried to brush it off. We spent the rest of the evening watching TV, but out of nowhere we heard it again. This time it was louder — deep, heavy scratching noises, like something was clawing at the walls in the guest room. My parents' dogs bolted into the master bedroom.

"What the hell is that?" I asked, heart racing. My dad sighed and said "It happens sometimes. We don't know what it is." My mom, again, just said "Ignore it."





The noises stopped after about ten minutes. Despite the unsettling atmosphere, the night continued without incident. Eventually, my parents went to bed, and I made my way to the guest room, still a bit on edge. I left the door open and kept a nightlight on, hoping it would ease my nerves. After playing some more video games, I decided to call it a night.

At some point, I woke up suddenly, facing the wall. The house was silent, but I was gripped by a chilling sensation — I felt like I was being watched. The fear was immediate and overwhelming. I was frozen, too scared to move, terrified that if I did, something terrible would happen. But somehow, I managed to slowly turn over and look at the doorway.

What I saw there is something I will NEVER forget.

Standing in the doorway was a tall, dark, humanoid figure. It just stood there, watching me. Its eyes were a deep red — not glowing, but a dark unsettling shade — and its fingers looked sharp, almost like claws. I was paralyzed with fear, unable to scream or even move. I don't know how long it stood there, and I have no idea how long it had been watching me before I woke up. After what felt like an eternity, an oppressive wave of exhaustion washed over me. I blacked out.

When I woke up the next morning, the door was closed, and the nightlight was off. I went to the kitchen where my mom was already awake, and I asked her if she had closed the door or turned off the light. She swore neither her nor my dad had been near my room that morning. The realization terrified me. When I told them what had happened, they both looked disturbed, though they suggested it might have been a nightmare caused by the creepy noises from the night before. But I'm certain it wasn't a dream. I believe whatever I saw did something to make me fall back asleep, and I'm convinced it turned off the light and closed the door.

For the rest of the break, and every time I stayed there after, I always kept the door shut and the TV and nightlight on. I never saw the creature again, but strange things continued to happen in that house while my parents lived there. Eventually, they made friends with some neighbors, who mentioned having similar experiences in their home. The entire area was a brand-new development, so I started to wonder if it wasn't the houses that were haunted — but the land itself.

Even to this day, I do not like sleeping with my bedroom door open. If I wake up in the middle of the night, I will not allow myself to look toward the doorway. I've never seen the creature again, and I hope I never do. 🔥



**Dax Thomas** resides in Albuquerque with his husband and their cat. Passionate about horror movies, video games, and vinyl collecting, he is also dedicated to his work with a national non profit on empowering youth within the community.

but i'm thinking it over anyway



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POC submissions are encouraged. Anonymous contributions are welcomed.

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**Essays:** Preferred. Please no greater than 700 words.

**Poetry:** Check the size of these pages & gauge your length accordingly.

**Journalism:** Depends on the story; let's talk.

**Art:** PNG or PDF. Absolutely *nothing* AI-generated.

Submissions are limited to one (1) per person per issue.

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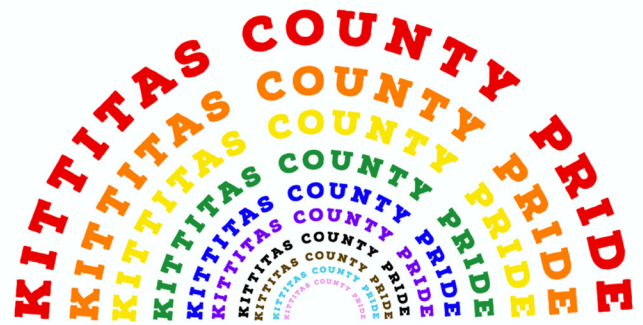
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