

Also by Robert Shearman

Tiny Deaths
Wanting to Believe (non-fiction)
Love Songs for the Shy and Cynical
Roadkill (novella)
Running Through Corridors (non-fiction)
Caustic Comedies (Plays)
Everyone's Just So So Special
Remember Why You Fear Me
They Do the Same Things Different There

Year's Best Weird Fiction Volume Five, Guest
Editor Robert Shearman, Series Editor
Michael Kelly, Undertow Publications, 2018
Fifth volume of yearly anthology.

Chilling Tales: Evil Did I Dwell, Lewd I Did Live
Chilling Tales: In Words, Alas, Drown I
Shadows & Tall Trees (Vols. 1-7)
Year's Best Weird Fiction, Vol. 1 (With Laird Barron)
Year's Best Weird Fiction, Vol. 2 (With Kathe Koja)
Year's Best Weird Fiction, Vol. 3 (With Simon Strantzas)
Year's Best Weird Fiction, Vol. 4 (With Helen Marshall)



Year's Best Weird Fiction

VOLUME FIVE

Guest Editor

ROBERT SHEARMAN

Series Editor

MICHAEL KELLY



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MICHAEL KELLY

Foreword

WELCOME TO THE FIFTH, AND FINAL, VOLUME OF *THE Year's Best Weird Fiction!*

Indeed, this will be the final volume of this anthology series. When I started the series, I told myself I would give it five volumes, then reassess. There are many underlying reasons as to why I am shuttering the series, but the main factor is simply the lack of sales. Not enough people are buying the books to keep it viable. In terms of time and money, it is an extremely costly book to assemble. And, as publisher and series editor, I bear all the costs myself.

It would be fair to say that I am sad and disappointed at this development. The series, to me, was unique in that each volume had a different guest editor, thus ensuring the book was fresh and distinctive each year. In my opinion, no other genre 'Year's Best' anthology was as broad and diverse in range and scope. The *Year's Best Weird Fiction* rarely had any overlap with the other anthologies. In fact, I felt it did an admirable job of filling in the gaps of the other 'Year's Best' anthologies with stories that fell between genre cracks. Which was

her flesh and the heel of its blade sliced into the meat of her thumb. The stink of burnt flesh filled the room. Her skin blistered but she did not drop the knife. Tears blinded her but she gripped the knife all the more tightly. She screamed and she struck.

Red Hood's first strike cut loose a hank of the stranger's hair. He laughed and caught her by the arm, spinning her around as if he were a prince and she his princess engaged in a dance. "You owe me a kiss," he whispered, his breath tickling her ear. He twisted her arm behind her back. She cried out in pain, but this was not the arm that held the knife.

Her second strike slashed the stranger across his bicep, slicing through his sleeve and drawing a trickle of blood. He cried out in surprise and released her. "You cut me," he said. He shook his head in disbelief. "All over a kiss."

Her third strike pierced the stranger through the eye. He stumbled back. The knife protruded from his eye socket, and he crumpled dead to the floor.

Afterward, Red Hood bandaged her hand and tidied the apartment. She gathered up her belongings, not forgetting her knife, the remaining can of soup, and the cough syrup, and slipped into her suit of skin. She freshened the suit with the kindly stranger's blood and then shoved his body out the window. She watched it tumble through the air and smack against the pavement, and continued to watch as the Risen shambled from the shadows and shredded his flesh. On her way home, she passed one of the Risen gnawing on a bone. The creature growled when she approached, and followed her. Red Hood had nothing to fear. She wore her suit of skin and the creature fawned about her bloody heels like a dog loyal to its master.



REBECCA
KUDER



Curb
Day



EACH YEAR IN MAY, WE MUST HAUL A GHASTLY number of items to the curb. It's mandatory. For years now. We don't even question it anymore.

They start collecting the third Friday at dawn. They start at a different house each year. No one knows how they choose. We have to be ready. We have to produce. They measure what we put out.

I hate the scramble. Stacks and boxes and cabinets to paddle through. I need to touch each scrap, have a conversation before discarding. I promised myself I would start early this year: the bottom of the house, because that's where time and gravity rule the world of accumulation. In the basement last Thursday, I unfurled three new bags, thinking it would be easier to add scraps as I found them. Into one bag I tossed parts of several broken coffeemakers full of mealy dust, a chipped mixing bowl, two ancient light fixtures that will never shine again, and reams of disintegrating-rubber-band-wrapped greeting cards from when I was a child and forced by Mother to write too many thank you notes (those whimsical bunnies, kittens, now greeting no one).

Despite all this gathering, I still need more.

On the basement shelves last Friday, I found a box marked *fragile*. Grandmother's handwriting. As I opened it, the box fluttered apart. Inside I found stained lace curtains used as padding. I unwrapped them and extracted the first treasure: a Depression glass refrigerator dish. Grandmother kept butter in it. For nearly thirty minutes, I held the dish. Its lid is chipped. I don't use it, clearly. Into the trash bag nest it went, with the padding. In a rush of energy, I opened another box and found several bottles of Dickinson's Witch Hazel. One still had a lick of amber in the bottom. I held this bottle even longer than the butter dish. Finally, I opened the bottle, its corroded metal lid snowing bits of rust on my lap, and inhaled. Grandmother . . . long-dead . . . setting

her hair, cotton balls of witch hazel baptizing strands of silver, twirling hair and pinning the pin curl clips . . . Next, her ancient Noxzema jar, with a layer of cracked white glazing at the bottom. The things that she touched and used. The invisible backdrop to her days. The second bag would wait. I stopped to fix lunch.

The light fixture and butter dish bag waits at the foot of the basement steps. I've been tripping over it since I left it there last week. The object (trash bag) becomes an action (trip), becomes more and also less than what it actually is. The bag is no longer a bag. What it actually *is* shifts, is another way of putting it.

All this tripping over bags. You would think I'd just stop going down there, but the yearly collection won't allow me to avoid a single corner of this gaping house. So much for starting early. Before I bring *that* bag to the curb I will have to peer inside again and confirm I can jettison the contents. Must double-check. Starting early only makes more work.

I had a visit from the local government. They knocked at the door, said they want us to produce at least a third, *one whole third* more than last year. Hard to fathom how. Last year was brutal. Last year I put out three bags and still earned a caution notice. But the more we produce, so they claim, the safer we are, and the less they will bother us. The less they will come knocking at the door, faces full of cheer, plastic-framed mouths buttering us as if we are warm toast. *Oh, excuse me, but in searching our records, we find that historically, you haven't put out enough. Our records indicate that last year, you didn't seem to be in earnest. This is your complimentary warning. We assume you plan to endure?* Words spoken in that tone of buttering, nothing in writing. I have looked in several of the mirrors recently. Behold, I am not warm toast. I am human. The plastic butter-ghosts stood on my porch with their knives to spread spread spread buttered requests and warnings, as if all we live for is to lug out some ever-increasing amount. Each

year there is math, and each year the only thing that accumulates is my unwanting. Now, a fourth bag?

No one objects or complains. And with what we've seen, why should we? We follow rules and drag, drag it all to the curb. But I worry there might be something in those bags that I will need again. Some wire, some lace. Can't some of it stay in my house? Deciding what to expel is excruciating. I spent yesterday hunting an appliance until I remembered I had bagged it last year; it's gone. How will it be possible to find enough?

I have been moving up and down flights of stairs all morning. Up, down. I go to the basement. Groping through the butter dish bag, something sharp bites my hand, rips the bag. The flimsy membrane of the bag won't hold it. Why do I always buy such cheap bags? Mr. Warner next door—his bags are ridiculously sturdy. No one on our street produces like Mr. Warner does. He walks from house to curb carrying two at a time, off the ground. No dragging, not for Mr. Warner. An optimist. Yesterday I heard him whistling! Something from the '50s. Those bags of his are big enough to hold a dog's carcass, a wet one. A wet dog's carcass, I tell you. I tell you I'm going to *take* one of his bags. He puts them out days ahead, no fear of anyone taking one or two; he has so many. I would hide one or two fat ones in my basement for next year. I would.

It's going to be tight this year. Yes, I admit I have trouble letting go. But even if I didn't. The noise in my house is quieter when scraps and layers remain undisturbed. With my scraps intact it's a warmer house; my walls are safer; I can exhale. Sometimes I can relax. You might not believe this but when I keep scraps, the house exhales and sometimes relaxes. Without the scraps, the wind comes through, even on a warm day. Those scraps are all that is keeping me safe.

But they said *one third more* and my hand is bleeding. Damn that sharpness, which has now squirmed to the bottom of the frail bag. And the bag is leaking. Just now I dragged it up from the basement to the parlor and was followed by a glistening trail, something a slug

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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