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# WHEN OTHER PEOPLE SAW US, THEY SAW THE DEAD

• A BIPOC GOTHIC ANTHOLOGY •

WHEN OTHER  
PEOPLE SAW US,  
THEY SAW THE DEAD

**Edited by  
Lauren T. Davila**

WHEN OTHER PEOPLE SAW US, THEY SAW THE DEAD

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“The Repetition Tango” by Alicia Thompson first appeared in the Los Angeles Public Library’s Short Story Dispenser in 2019. All stories appeared in the original edition of this anthology, published by Haunt Publishing, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2022.

Published by Outland Entertainment LLC  
3119 Gillham Road  
Kansas City, MO 64109

Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler  
Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott

ISBN (paper): 978-1-954255-59-3  
ISBN (eBook): 978-1-954255-60-9  
North American Rights  
Created in the United States of America

Editor: Lauren T. Davila  
Copy editor: Alana Joli Abbott  
Galley Proofer: Stephanie Scott  
Cover Illustration: Mina Martinez  
Cover Design: Jeremy D. Mohler  
Interior Layout: Mikael Brodu

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Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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# PRAISE FOR — *THEY SAW THE DEAD* —

“A haunting and poignant anthology. The gorgeous voices within culminate to create a memorable work. These stories of grief, love, fear, and ghosts cut deep; the authors have infused Gothic elements in their own unique way, and the shadows of each tale will linger in the reader’s mind long after reading. A stunning addition to the horror canon.”

Sara Tantlinger, Bram Stoker Award-winning  
author of *The Devil's Dreamland*

“Beautiful and heartbreaking, *They Saw the Dead* is one of those rare anthologies without a single subpar story. From start to finish I was fully immersed in the collection’s world of darkness, lost loves, and ghosts. A much-needed collection of diverse stories from BIPOC.”

## Diversity in Horror

“Terrifying and thought-provoking, this anthology is perfect for fans of small stories that pack a big punch.”

Hannah Whitten, author of *For the Wolf*

“Grabs you by the throat from the very first story. As you navigate from one twisted world into the next, you’ll find yourself on an adventure—visiting cold lakes and houses with huts best left alone, receiving notes and letters that warn and welcome you at once. Every so often, you’ll flip a page and find a story that is indelible—both quietly horrific and so beautiful. Brace yourselves—this anthology is deliciously, meditatively, dark.”

Bhavika Govil

“A delicious anthology of stories from authors of color across the globe. Within these stories lie the horrors of colonialism and the loss of identity and home, but also the beauty and humour found and created through community and love; memories of shared meals and music; and magic which heals, takes vengeance, and empowers. This collection is bursting with some of the most exciting voices in contemporary dark fiction. These stories will challenge you, make you heartsore, and leave you feeling richer for the reading.”

**Katalina Watt, author**

“At once blooming with rage and gentle with memory. From rotting, ravenous colonisers to the creeping ghosts of generations past, stories of fantasy, folktale, and horror come together to create something truly haunting in this powerful collection.”

**Andrew Joseph White, author of *Hell Followed with Us***

## — CONTENT WARNINGS —

The publisher has made every effort to accurately reflect the content in this book. Any omissions are accidental and the publisher's own.

### CONTENT WARNINGS A-Z

**Abuse:** Blood and the Bottomland; Headmaster; The Candlemaker's Daughter.

**Alcohol:** Blood and the Bottomland; Sight; The Mountain Air.

**Blood, gore:** Clockwork; For Evermore; Headmaster; Hollywood Nightmare; In the Bone Fields; Poppy Tea and Hearty Pie; Reincarnated Rose; Smoke from a Flame; The Candlemaker's Daughter; The Guilt of Rosalino; The Mountain Air.

**Bullying:** In the Bone Fields.

**Colonialism:** Clockwork; Headmaster; Poppy Tea and Hearty Pie; The Guilt of Rosalino.

**Death:** Acheron's Lesson; Clockwork; Every Soul Will Taste Death; For Evermore; Headmaster; In the Bone Fields; On the Shoreline; Poppy Tea and Hearty Pie; Reincarnated Rose; Sight; Smoke from a Flame; The Candlemaker's Daughter; The Ghost of Creek Hill; The Guilt of Rosalino; The Mountain Air; The Veil and the Cord.

**Drug abuse:** What the Wind Brought with It.

**Loss of a loved one:** Acheron's Lesson; Every Soul Will Taste Death; In the Bone Fields; On the Shoreline; Reincarnated Rose; Smoke from a Flame; The Ghost of Creek Hill.

**Manipulation:** Clockwork; For Evermore; The Candlemaker's Daughter.

**Mind control:** For Evermore.

**Misogyny:** Clockwork; On the Shoreline; Poppy Tea and Hearty Pie; The Candlemaker's Daughter.

**Pregnancy:** Blood and the Bottomland.

**Racism:** Blood and the Bottomland; Clockwork; Headmaster; On the Shoreline; Poppy Tea and Hearty Pie; The Candlemaker's Daughter; The Guilt of Rosalino; The House by the Dell; Yama-Uba.

**Sexual assault:** Headmaster; The Mountain Air.

**Slavery:** Blood and the Bottomland; Poppy Tea and Hearty Pie.

**Suicide:** Headmaster; The Ghost of Creek Hill.

**Torture:** The Candlemaker's Daughter.

**Violence:** Headmaster; The Candlemaker's Daughter; The Mountain Air.

## CONTENT WARNINGS BY STORY

**Acheron's Lesson:** Death; loss of a loved one.

**Sight:** Alcohol; death.

**Clockwork:** Blood, gore; colonialism; death; manipulation; misogyny; racism.

**In the Bone Fields:** Blood, gore; bullying; death; loss of a loved one.

**The Mountain Air:** Alcohol; blood, gore; death; sexual assault; violence.

**We Have Always Lived in the Projects:** None.

**Headmaster:** Abuse; blood, gore; colonialism; death; racism; sexual assault; suicide; violence.

The Repetition Tango: None.

**Blood and the Bottomland:** Abuse; alcohol; pregnancy; racism; slavery.

**Smoke from a Flame:** Blood, gore; death; loss of a loved one.



**The Candlemaker's Daughter:** Abuse; blood, gore; death; manipulation; misogyny; racism; torture; violence.

**Reincarnated Rose:** Blood, gore; death; loss of a loved one.

**For Evermore:** Blood, gore; death; manipulation; mind control.

**Hollywood Nightmare:** Blood, gore.

**On the Shoreline:** Death; loss of a loved one; misogyny; racism.

**The Guilt of Rosalino:** Blood, gore; colonialism; death; racism.

**The House by the Dell:** Racism.

**The Veil and the Cord:** Death.

**Poppy Tea and Hearty Pie:** Blood, gore; colonialism; death; misogyny; racism; slavery.

**What the Wind Brought with It:** Drug abuse.

**Yama-uba:** Racism.

**Dream House:** None.

**The Ghost of Creek Hill:** Death; loss of a loved one; suicide.

**Every Soul Will Taste Death:** Death; loss of a loved one.

## — INTRODUCTION —

**R**epresentation matters.

Representation on the page and behind the page matters. I've always believed that it is crucial for authors to be as diverse as the characters we see represented. Marginalized authors still do not have the same opportunities as those from historically privileged backgrounds. If marginalized authors are published, they often find success only by writing literary works focused on racism, immigration, death, or other hot-button issues. However, what about the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) authors who want to write genre stories? Romance or fantasy or Gothic horror?

Historically, Gothic has been extremely white-/male-/cis-centric. So, when conceptualizing this anthology, I couldn't help but wonder—what would a Gothic horror collection look like through a truly diverse lens?

In this collection I've gathered twenty-four stories that engage with "the Gothic" from authors under the broad umbrella of BIPOC. Each story accesses the Gothic from a particular racial standpoint specific to its author. Many of these authors are intersectional beyond BIPOC identity, whether in terms of religion, sexual orientation, disability, or otherwise. These are stories,

reimagined or original, about haunted houses, intergenerational trauma, lost loves, and more. Spanning cultures, continents, and backgrounds, this anthology is one I envisaged as escapism in its purest form.

“Gothic horror reminds readers of one eternal truth: death will find us all. But instead of running away from this often-feared condition, gothic stories embrace it, and even reveal in it a sort of beauty. Death is not prejudiced, and the voices of BIPOC writers add breadth and depth to a subject that affects us all.” —Daphne Dador

“Horror has always meant to challenge and speak in twisted metaphors of our real-world fears, but what do those fears look like outside the standard paradigm? That’s why we need a diversity of perspectives: to feed the curiosity of both our own fears and the fears of others.” —Desiree Alvarado

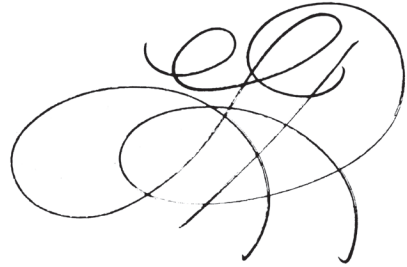
“A lot of gothic stories are tied to European roots, and diverse writers are needed to expand this scope. They bring in stories that underrepresented folks can actually see themselves in. With our anthology, we’re reimagining the landscape, applying a myriad of experiences linked to identities that aren’t usually in the spotlight.”—Emily Hoang

“I used to think Gothic horror was a genre only white people wrote about white characters, but I now realize the thoughtful and symbolic nature of the genre: an amazing avenue for confronting the frustrations faced as a WOC and the history of my family/ heritage/culture.” —Nisha Addleman

“For centuries, gothic horror has looked the same. Crumbling Victorian mansions sitting forlornly on forgotten patches of countryside, or precariously on foggy sea ledges. But while these mansions often manifest as characters in themselves, what they represent is universal. Diversity in gothic horror allows us to explore each quiet room and hallway tucked away in our own cultures. It changes the landscape, but not the sense of isolation and loneliness. It reminds us that while what haunts us may look different, the manifestation of our fears is one place we will never be alone.” —C.M. Leyva

I thank all the writers for trusting me with their work. I hope this anthology haunts you long after you turn the final page.

Lauren T. Davila





— ACHERON'S LESSON —  
by Adam Ma

**T**he hardest part about carrying your body into the dinghy was navigating the darkness. My hands fumbled with every task. It was frustrating, but the night was as much a shroud as it was a hindrance, lending me the confidence to do what I wouldn't have been able to achieve were I exposed to light. It was far from the only stroke of luck I had been blessed with.

The docks were empty, and I knew this place well. The owner was a friend of the family. Their small metal boat had been left close to the water and was easy for me to push off the rack and into the river. I stole the motor from their shed, snapping the lock with a pair of bolt cutters I'd brought from home. I took gas and rope. Every step of the way I wondered what I would say when I got caught. I expected barking dogs, or searchlights, or a scream to startle me from my work. In the end, I was the one to break the silence as I brought the motor to life and steered the boat upriver.



I'm sure they've called the police by now, but it doesn't really matter. It's the middle of the night, and I'm hours away.

I have lived near these marshes my whole life, but at this moment I am an intruder. The low whirr of the engine cuts through the chirping and screeching of insects and forces the water to clap unevenly against the bow. I have only a vague sense of what direction I'm taking us in, but I cling tightly to the idea that I know what I'm doing. Any action right now feels better than how useless I felt standing alone in our home.

I wish I could talk to you, but I can't stand to see the way you are now, tightly wrapped in blankets and bungee cords. I don't remember how long it took to bundle you this way. The moment I look down at your cloth cocoon, questions begin to surface. I don't want questions infiltrating my thoughts at this moment. The most I can handle are facts.

You are dead, but a part of you is alive and is burning so vividly within me that I cannot understand your absence. Your heart is still, but I can still feel it beating heavily against my own. You can't speak, but I can still hear your voice so fresh in my mind. You passed quietly, alone, during your sleep. That's what's driven me to this place. There is no one to blame for your demise, and the very idea of that frustrates and infuriates me. Something horrible has happened to you, and there's nothing that can be done.

There are rules for approaching death, but those laws and traditions feel so far from me at this moment. Every time I look at you my mind wanders. I'm trying to recall stories my grandmother used to tell me. I'm not special. Everyone has a grandmother with stories. We grow up learning all kinds of useless superstitions. Some of it becomes a habit, like holding your breath when you pass a grave or keeping your feet off the cracks in the sidewalk. Other memories you recall only when you're living in the moment. When you're moving, you leave the broom behind. Sneezing with food in your mouth invites illness. Flowers bring good tidings, unless they bloom too early, or fade too soon, or if you find them tangled

in vines, or if you find them too far under a willow's shade. Rules upon rules, all circumstantial.

As my grandmother would tell it, there is a power in running water. Places where the world of the living and the dead meet, where spirits can more easily flow from one realm to another. She claimed she saw her father once, smiling and thankful, days after he had passed. It was sunrise, and I remember the tone of her voice when she told me how terrified but thankful she was to be able to catch one last glimpse of him. She watched him step across the water, heading deep into the marsh, but, fearing the boundary between life and death, she chose to watch his spirit fade into shadow. When I asked why she didn't go to him, her answer was simple:

"It was just his spirit. His body was long gone. I had gone there to pay my respects, and he was only stopping by to say goodbye."

The story reached me in such vivid clarity. Once buried you'll be lost to me, and I can't bring myself to think that far ahead. Ten hours ago you were still with me. Fifteen hours ago we were making weekend plans. Our last meal at a shared table was over twenty hours ago. Every second pushes us further apart. How fast can a spirit travel? How long before the current takes you away, permanently, to a place I cannot follow? Your body rests at my feet, bundled and safe from the calculated, modern procedures that would strip you of your humanity and seal you from my touch. For now, I have saved you from that fate.

Together we travel upriver, to find that missing piece of you that's slipped away.



It is several hours into our journey, and I have not seen the sun. In its place is a moon that should have begun to fade into the distance. I am beginning to suspect that I have crossed a threshold and time has lost meaning. The celestial orb above is too close in



the sky to be the moon I am familiar with, and it lights my way with a shimmering silver glow that radiates across a sky of pitch-black night. I cannot see the stars. They have been swallowed by this foreign body, and, without them, my way is lost.

A large part of me is relieved. My missing daylight and this lunar fallacy are something immediate that I can worry about. I don't have to pay attention to how still you rest. I slow my pace across the wetlands by dropping the motor to its lowest setting, gently pushing my stolen vessel across the water. My attention is turned in every direction except to what lies within my boat, and in searching for my destination I am met with oddities that strike both fear and comfort in my heart.

There's a stench in the air I can't pin down. These wetlands have always smelled terrible, but what clogs my nostrils doesn't feel green. It smells old. Noxious. I have a faint suspicion of the source, but as my boat cuts ahead in this endless mire, I find myself still tethered to science and reason. It is too soon for rot to bloom in you. I fold a shred of cloth over my mouth and continue guiding us ahead while my eyes scan for the source. I keep clear of whatever may be hiding within the reeds and steer ahead through open water, where I am confident this vessel can glide unhindered.

We drift in the glow of the silvery unmoon, and I catch a glimpse of something in the water. That glinting light gave it the appearance of stone, but the closer I approach the more clearly I can recognize the form of a woman. Her body is an iceberg, only partly afloat across the mire's surface. Her skin is pale and stained in hues of green from the water's grasp. The way her head is tilted across the surface, face half exposed to the air, reveals her state of being. Her eyes are open, unblinking, occasionally dipping below the chop of murky water disturbed by my presence. I keep myself from approaching any closer. Her presence feels wrong, though I am the intruder here. My vessel glides past, and I can see her moss-tinted pupils follow my path across the water. I closely watch her

chest in search of the rise and fall of shallow breathing, but can find only a still lifelessness betrayed by her unblinking gaze.

The woman is not the only body I see. There are more, some caught in the reeds or tangled in the roots of marsh trees like insects trapped in a wooden web. They are clothed, or naked, or mummified in bundles of fabric long drained of color by time and exposure to the water's eroding touch. I steer to avoid them where I can. Where I can't, I close my eyes and try to ignore the sound of their forms striking and scraping against the aluminum hull. The farther I press, the more these abandoned bodies begin to dot the landscape. I know in my heart they are loved ones whose partners did not have the resolve to venture further. It is a sign that I am on the right path, and I refuse to fail.

I press ahead as the small motor of my vessel sputters to a halt. I do not feel like it should have died so soon, but I am in no position to argue. I'm forced to draw up my oar and row as steadily as possible. I guide us ahead, parallel to the shore. Close enough that I could turn and find land, though truthfully I do not wish to step onto it. Something moves between the mud and the trees. I've seen pale corpses disappear between the reeds. Without the whirr of an engine filling the air around me I can hear the agonized snap of bark echo across the water as something beyond my sight pushes through the trees.

I am tired, but time seems meaningless in this place. Drifting across these waters where so many rest eternally, I hesitate to give myself any sort of reprieve. I keep my gaze focused ahead. An object in the distance is beginning to come into view. Two massive trees unlike any I have seen. They've grown up from the mire on an island of rock and mud, curling and twisting their entwined branches as though they've been shaped by an unseen hand. Their boughs bend apart and arch back together to form an uneven portal or gate. It is impossible to make out any more detail from

where I row, but its existence in my path must mean I am close to the end.

The water here is thick with bodies. So many have been left behind. I think the current passes them along to the base of these trees, leaving them mockingly adrift along the muddy shore so close to their destination. I'm forced to paddle through them until the bow of my boat sinks into the muck, and my body freezes in place as I realize I have been deceived. Pale flesh from twisted limbs and gnarled fingers breach the mud, revealing the true composition of this island. It is rock, and flesh, and mud, and bone, and I do my best to ignore what I'm stepping on as I drag our stolen vessel to shore. You seem heavier now than you were at the start of this journey, and my burning arms struggle to pull your body up from the floor of the dinghy. It seems a sacrilege to let any part of you touch this grime-coated place, but I cannot avoid it. Your cloth-wrapped legs splash into the water's edge as I pull you onto this macabre shore.

I can inspect the gateway now. Both trees twist and intersect at their canopy to create an imperfect circle. Resting through the portal between the bark is a foggy haze my vision cannot penetrate. I do not know what to do, but dragging your body closer seems to be the only option I am left with.

I hear a man's voice before I realize how uncomfortably close he is to me. His unseen approach startles me into clutching your body to my breast as if you could protect me. I have never seen this stranger's face before, but his voice is gentle in a way I do not trust. It is like speaking to a dam. Every word is carefully selected to slip past his lips. He is draped in a dark cloak so clean it's as if the mire itself refused to touch him.

"What brings you here?" he asks.

I am hesitant to say. I no longer know what fables can be trusted, and I have a deep fear of any creature longing for my words.

"Is that your lover? Do you intend to bring them back to life?" He gestures to the gate ahead of us. Like a fool, I answer.

"Yes. How does it work?"

"Their soul could be returned if you bring them to it. Pass their body from one side to the other. Be careful not to touch it."

"Are you here to try and stop me?"

"I have no intention to step in your way. I am just a traveler, and it is only in good fortune that we are able to meet this evening. You must miss your companion greatly, to have carried them so far."

"I do."

"And what will you do if you pass their body through that gate and they return different from what you remember?"

The stranger is asking questions I never thought to consider, and I am instantly resentful of the implication. You had passed in your sleep. It was peaceful but unjust. I wasn't ready. You couldn't possibly have been ready to leave what we had built together. It seemed so obvious that you would want to return to me.

"That's not fair," I say.

"Death often changes the spirit."

"You don't know that."

"Death has already changed you."

My fingers grip the cloth that wraps you, and at this moment the weight of your body feels like a foreign thing. I don't want to speak of myself again. Instead, I ask, "Who did you lose that brought you here?"

"I've lost many. But no one, in particular, has brought me to this place. Unlike you, I am welcomed here as a denizen among the living and the dead. I've been here many times before. You are not the first mourner I have found carrying a loved one to this place between life and death."

"I am mourning," I admit. "I want more time. I wasn't ready for this."

"That's understandable."

"I feel so alone. I don't know how to make my heart stop hurting. I know this is supposed to be part of a process, but I don't want any part of it. I don't want to see my family. I don't want to hear that I'll be okay. I don't want to talk to anyone, or relive memories, or explain what things I'll need to keep, or donate, or decide to throw away. I don't want to throw anything away. I don't want to let go if it means being alone. Not after all this time of searching, and making mistakes, and building. We built everything together. I don't feel strong enough. I don't want to let any of it go."

"So you would bring them back because you're afraid of being alone."

"No. Yes. I'm not afraid. I just don't want to be like this. I don't want to feel this way. And I know everyone will tell me this won't last. I don't care. The thought of this sadness lasting for days or weeks makes me wish I was dead. I don't want this to be how our story ends."

"Sweet child." I hear a pity in the stranger's voice that wasn't there before. He moves closer to me, and under the silver light of the unmoon I can see this man is nothing human. There's no warmth in his complexion. He glides across the mud in a smooth motion that makes no more sound than a feather's fall. "The spirit is empowered by the history of those who touch our hearts. You have proved this by coming here, to where the living do not belong and the dead do not linger. You made the journey alone, but did you not draw from the strength of their enduring memory to reach this place?"

I look down at you. I am not ready to let go, but I know what I am holding onto isn't quite you anymore. I am scared to forget the components of you that have become such a tremendous part of me. Your laugh. Your warmth. All the small habits of yours that built their way into my life, for better or worse.

"I don't want to move on," I say.

“Then don’t. Keep them with you. Take them wherever you go. Grip as tightly as you can, but do not carry them as you do now. Heed my wisdom. I am a creature that survives by drawing strength from others. You see me now as transcendent. In truth, much like you; I cannot survive alone. We rely on others to unlock the full potential of our spirit, but, in my experience, the weight of someone else’s love should never be a burden to you.”

The mire is silent beyond the beating of my heart. I see the bodies of those who were left behind in this place and lock eyes with one whose gaze rests pointed in my direction. I think of how forgotten they must feel. Abandoned.

“Can you help me?” I ask the stranger. Solemnly, he does.

Together we raise you back into the boat. The stranger helps me lay you down, and we gently push you back across the water. I cannot carry you any farther, and I dare not risk the thought of passing you through this gate only for you to return as something different. This compromise feels wrong, but to see you lying abandoned with these forgotten souls feels like a violation of our love. Instead, your body slowly drifts away. I have to remind myself it’s just your body. You’re not in it anymore. It isn’t you. The real you is beyond the gate I cannot touch.

I ask the stranger where he is going next. He tells me he’s traveling away from this place and lets me know that I am welcome to join him. I don’t know what options I may have. I should be afraid, but as I stand in this moment, I feel numb to fear. There is something about the stranger that calms me. He seems immune to this kind of pain. Or perhaps he is so accustomed to experiencing it that he knows a secret to navigate grief that I cannot comprehend. Whatever his reason, I am envious. He says he is immortal, and I believe him. I am building the courage to ask how he manages to carry such a weight. He has found a way to live on with sorrow, and that is a gift I desire. I believe it’s a gift he’s willing to impart.

I take a final look at your resting place as you drift across the water, then together we leave the gate behind. I am longing to be by your side, but, despite a yearning to run and drown myself in this corpse-laden nexus, I force my gaze ahead. I know that with my death our love would only be forgotten. Instead, down this path, perhaps I can survive with the memory of you resting deep in my eternal heart.