THE SHORTLIST

Horror Stories That'll Leave You Haunted and Bewitched

New books by Rebecca Turkewitz, Tobi Ogundiran and Paul Tremblay captivate with fresh terrors.

By Chelsea Leu

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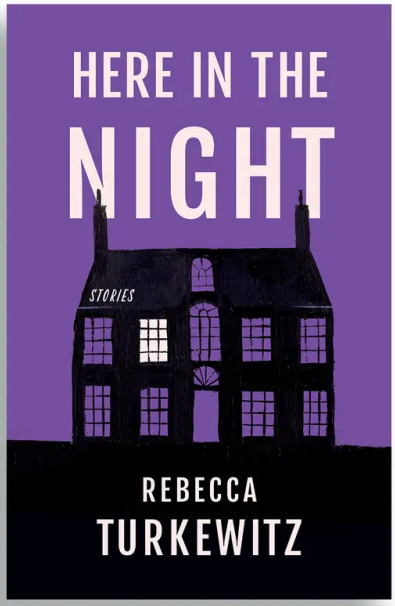
What becomes eerily palpable in Rebecca Turkewitz's collection **HERE IN THE NIGHT: Stories (Black Lawrence Press, 171 pp., paperback, $21.95)** aren't the specters or vengeful spirits, but the stories people tell about them. A teenage girl makes up a ghost tale with her crush in an attic, and "feels the story taking shape around them." A receptionist at a New Hampshire hotel fakes evidence that the building is haunted by a local drowned woman, and then ends up seeing her everywhere: "in the faces of the college girls who come for a summer weekend, their hair heavy with saltwater, their eyes trained on the white-capped waves." One character discovers that she's the subject of a campus ghost story at her alma mater, a yarn that echoes into an uncanny reality.

These are, in other words, ghost stories about the power of ghost stories, the way they reflect and transmute shared fears.

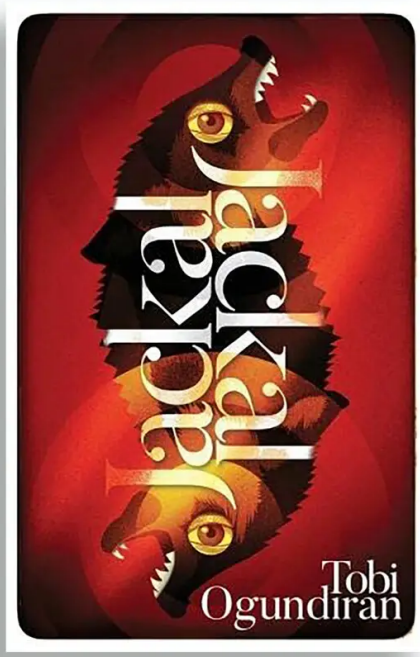


Some of Turkewitz's sharpest tales — from the story of a 12-year-old American girl who disappears in Portugal to the saga of a lesbian couple whose car breaks down on a dark rural road — tap into familiar, specifically female horrors. Though these narratives are filled with the otherworldly, they don't need supernatural beings to strike fear. The hauntingly short "Warnings," told from the collective perspective of a girls' track team, details the search for a missing runner. Eventually, their teammate's body is found by the bank of a river. "Nothing bad could've happened," the team insists in the story's crushing ending, as they refuse to accept that even their star teammate is vulnerable, is subject to danger, is not invincible. "She was so fast." By juxtaposing horror tropes with all-too-real violence, Turkewitz reveals the everyday darkness we live with.

Many of the stories in this collection feature pre-teen or teenage girls experiencing recognizable angsts — sleepovers, first love, moves to new neighborhoods — making it easy to slip into their worlds. But some stories are too detailed, front-loaded clumsily with character back story that drags down their momentum. Still, the collection's deep affection for spooky tales is contagious — this is a book that revels in the way scary stories "grab hold of people," as Turkewitz's receptionist notes, "giving shape to the night and its mysteries."

Partway through the second story in Tobi Ogundiran's collection **JACKAL, JACKAL: Tales of the Dark and Fantastic (Undertow Publications, 317 pp., paperback, $20)**, one starts to suspect that the author is writing with irrepressible glee. Perhaps it's the increasingly unnerving letters the story's traveling salesman receives, including one delivered by a raven. Perhaps it's the diarrhea and professional failure that befall the salesman when he ignores said letters. And perhaps it's that the salesman ends up sweating and cornered by a terror, all because he failed to return a library book. (The book? Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart.") Who knew impending doom could be so fun?

Vivid and twisted, ironic and stirring, the varied stories in the collection are told with verve, even when blameless characters meet gruesome ends. "The truth is that I'm moving into this old colonial manor to kill myself," one story matter-of-factly begins. In another, a sentient forest murders a character's mother and little brother by invading their bodies with plant growth, their "eye sockets choked with blossoms." In "The Goatkeeper's Harvest," an entire family simply ends up ravaged by malevolent goats.



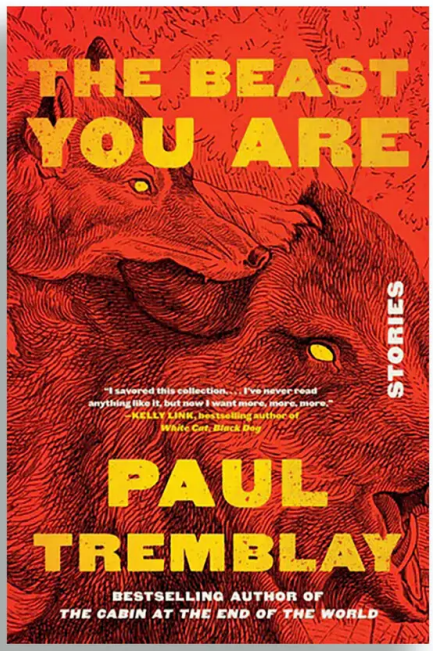
Nigerian myth, folklore and culture inform these stories, acting as touchstones that unify disparate worlds. Characters travel between the cities of Ibadan and Lagos and the state of Kwara; they feel the cool dry winds of harmattan and drink Gulder beer. A story centers on an abiku, a Yoruba spirit child that torments mothers by repeatedly dying after being born; a boy in another story plays a talking drum to ward off evil apparitions. Griots serve as totemic figures and reveal ancient lore. One flash fiction piece even takes the form of an ominous and delightfully arch letter from African royalty to a colonizing kingdom across the ocean. Spoiler alert: Things don't end well for the colonizers.

Beyond ghosts and gore, the collection contains another, more fantastical strain: epic stories featuring witch-kings and enchanted cities and realms where ancient beings reside, places where rare fruit can grant wishes. In either mode, Ogundiran's prose has a warm, enthusiastic vitality; through it we peek into myriad living universes we've never seen before, and rediscover our own capacity for thrill and wonder.

Yes, Paul Tremblay's **THE BEAST YOU ARE: Stories (William Morrow, 358 pp., $30)** contains more than a dozen horror stories — weird, self-referential, expertly told. But lurking in the back of the collection, and taking up nearly half of the book, is the title entry, "The Beast You Are," a free-verse epic poem so quirkily magisterial it deserves to be mentioned first.

Every 30 years, a giant mountain monster named Awn devours an unlucky resident of a village populated by talking animals, chosen by lottery. The poem follows two survivors of the lottery who take different paths over the next 60 years, as the village becomes warped by industrialization and political corruption: a dog who dedicates her life to destroying the beast and a cat who turns to chaotic violence for

her own mysterious reasons. The poem delivers a grim vision of hubris and collective apathy: When “no one appreciates/the great and terrible yawn/of history,” as the city’s rabbit archivist thinks, societal collapse will follow. It is all, frankly, riveting.



As with the title poem, the most frightening stories in the collection also happen to be the most philosophical, where the horror is aging, or grief, or childhood neglect. In one story, a fictional Paul Tremblay contends with a ghostly nightmare of a past self and the “small defeats and horrors that would build daily and yearly and eventually overtake me.” Other standout stories — “I Know You’re There,” about a dead husband’s possibly reanimated corpse, and “The Last Conversation,” which features a grieving widow’s army of clones — take their haunting power from a distinct sense of sorrow. In frantic, breathless sentences that stretch to a full page, “The Dead Thing” perfectly captures the despair of a teenage girl charged with caring for her uncommunicative little brother as their house becomes a heap of trash.

Shorter pieces present spine-tingling images or ideas: a strange red blob in a bedroom at an end-of-the-world-themed party, an eerie expanding building next to a library, a little sister who controls massive beasts with glowing eyes. Often, they end abruptly. But what seems to matter, in all these stories, aren’t the specifics of a grisly end but the emotions they conjure, the way they tinge our own reality after we turn the page.

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