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

Also by Michael Kelly

Songs From Dead Singers
Scratching the Surface
Ouroboros (With Carol Weekes)
Apparitions
Undertow & Other Laments
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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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons—living, dead, or undead—is entirely coincidental.

First Edition


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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.
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

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 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

Nadia Bulkin writes scary stories about the scary world we live in, thirteen of which appear in her debut collection, *She Said Destroy* (Word Horde, 2017). Her short stories have been included in editions of *The Year’s Best Weird Fiction*, *The Best Horror of the Year*, and *The Year’s Best Dark Fantasy & Horror*. She has been nominated for the Shirley Jackson Award five times, including for “Live Through This.” She grew up in Jakarta, Indonesia, with her Javanese father and American mother, before relocating to Lincoln, Nebraska. She has a B.A. in Political Science, an M.A. in International Affairs, and lives in Washington, D.C.

Daniel Carpenter’s short fiction has been published by *Unsung Stories*, *The Irish Literary Review*, and in *Unthology*, amongst others. He hosts The Paperchain Podcast, which was longlisted in The Saboteur Awards. He lives in London.

Adam-Troy Castro made his first non-fiction sale to *Spy* magazine in 1987. His 26 books to date include four Spider-Man novels, 3 novels about his profoundly damaged far-future murder investigator Andrea Cort, and 6 middle-grade novels about the dimension-spanning adventures of young Gustav Gloom. Adam’s darker short fiction for grownups is highlighted by his most recent collection, *Her Husband’s Hands And Other Stories* (Prime Books). Adam’s works have won the Philip K. Dick Award and the
Seiun (Japan), and have been nominated for eight Nebulas, three Stokers, two Hugos, and, internationally, the Ignatius (Spain), the Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire (France), and the Kurd-Lasswitz Preis (Germany). He lives in Florida with his wife Judi and either three or four cats, depending on what day you’re counting and whether Gilbert’s escaped this week.

Claire Dean’s short stories have been widely published and are included in Best British Short Stories 2011, 2014 and 2017 (Salt). Bremen, The Unwish, Marionettes and Into the Penny Arcade are published as chapbooks by Nightjar Press. Her first collection, The Museum of Shadows and Reflections, was published by Unsettling Wonder in 2016. She lives in the North of England with her family.

Kristi DeMeester is the author of Beneath, a novel published by Word Horde Publications, and Everything That’s Underneath, a short fiction collection from Apex Books. Her short fiction has appeared in publications such as Ellen Datlow’s The Year’s Best Horror Volume 9, Stephen Jones’ Best New Horror, Year’s Best Weird Fiction Volumes 1, and 3, in addition to publications such as Black Static, The Dark, and several others. In her spare time, she alternates between telling people how to pronounce her last name and how to spell her first. Find her online at www.kristidemeester.com.

Brian Evenson is the author of a dozen books of fiction, most recently the story collection A Collapse of Horses and the novella The Warren. He has been a finalist six times for the Shirley Jackson Award. His novel Last Days won the American Library Association’s award for Best Horror Novel of 2009. His novel The Open Curtain (Coffee House Press) was a finalist for an Edgar Award and an International Horror Guild Award. He is the recipient of three O. Henry Prizes as well as an NEA fellowship. He lives in Los Angeles and teaches in the Critical Studies Program at CalArts.

Jenni Fagan is a poet, novelist and screenwriter. She is published in eight languages, a Granta Best of Young British Novelist (once in a decade accolade) winner of Scottish Author of the Year, and on lists including IMPAC, James Tait Black, BBC Short Story Prize, Sunday Times Short Story, Encore, Desmond Elliott among others. Currently completing two novels set in Edinburgh, theatre and film adaptations for her first novel and her new poetry collection There’s a Witch in the Word Machine, comes out in Sep 2018.

Contributors’ Notes

Kurt Fawver is writer of horror, weird fiction, and literature that oozes through the cracks of genre. His short fiction has previously appeared in venues such as The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Strange Aeons, Weird Tales, Vastarien, and Gamut. His work has been chosen for inclusion in Best New Horror and Year’s Best Weird Fiction and has been nominated for the Shirley Jackson Award. Kurt has released two collections of short stories: Forever, in Pieces, and The Dissolution of Small Worlds, as well as one novella, Burning Witches, Burning Angels. He’s also had non-fiction published in journals such as Thinking Horror and the Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts. He lives in the apocalypse that’s known as “Florida” and dreams of days touched by snow. He wishes you delightful nightmares and magical waking hours.

Brenna Gomez was the recipient of a 2017 Hedgebrook residency. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Prairie Schooner and StoryQuarterly. She received her MFA from the University of New Mexico, where she was the Editor-in-Chief of Blue Mesa Review and the 2015 recipient of the Hispanic Writer Award for the UNM Summer Writers’ Conference in Santa Fe. Brenna is a reader for Electric Lit’s Recommended Reading. She currently teaches composition at UNM and hosts author events at Bookworks Albuquerque.

Camilla Grudova studied literature and art history at McGill University. Her collection of short stories, The Doll’s Alphabet was released in 2017. Her stories have appeared in The White Review and Granta. She is currently working on a novel and lives in Scotland.

Kathleen Kayembe is the Octavia E. Butler Scholar from Clarion’s class of 2016, with short stories in Lightspeed, Nightmare, and several Best of the Year anthologies for 2017, as well as an essay in the Hugo-nominated anthology Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler. Her work additionally appeared on the SFWA and Locus Recommended Reading Lists for 2017. She co-hosts the weekly writing podcast Write Pack Radio, runs Amherst Writers and Artists writing workshops, and, under the pen name Kaseka Nvita, writes queer romances. She currently lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with a beloved collection of fountain pens, inks, and notebooks, and never enough time to write—or read—all that she wants.

Michael Kelly is the editor of Shadows & Tall Trees, and Series Editor of the