

Shock Totem

Issue #9

Reviewed by Charlie Harmon

Editor: K. Allen Wood

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Web Address: shocktotem.com

What they publish: short stories, novelettes (up to 12,000 words), book reviews, poetry, and creative non-fiction that relates to horror.

Submission Guidelines: They're looking for your best "dark fantasy and horror--mystery, suspense, supernatural, morbid humor, fantasy, etc. But the stories must have a clear horror element." They only accept submissions online, via Submishmash, and their average response time runs anywhere from thirty to sixty days. They pay a professional rate (\$.05/word).

Description of Publication: *Shock Totem* is a biannual print and online horror magazine. In an interview, K. Allen Wood said they publish, "Stuff we dig," but the stories in the two issues I've read have been literary rather than pulpy, focusing more on strong imagery and slow-building, cerebral horror than visceral shocks or gore.

Prose per issue: They print around ten short stories per issue, along with a few poems, a couple of author interviews, six to ten book reviews, and maybe a non-fiction article or two, including, in this issue, an editorial about two middle school teachers who lost their jobs for producing a low budget horror film in their spare time.

Prose Reviews:

"You Are Here," by Stephen Graham Jones, is a plain spoken contemporary horror story set (mostly) in a hotel lobby over a single, crystallized moment of time. The subjective first person narrator, who is never named, starts by describing the sight of a baby's severed finger on the hotel floor, surrounded by the sounds of screams. He envisions the finger falling under the elevator and regenerating into a new baby in the hotel's basement. He also pictures the nine-fingered child years down the line, selling lemonade in the front yard and realizing that "there's the base-ten world, and there's him." He then thinks back to what he's doing in the hotel, to the elaborate murder he's just committed and the obsessive-compulsive post-murder rituals that led to his accidentally closing the door to the stairs on the baby's hand. Feeling exposed, he jumps on an opportunity and closes the same door on the child's mother's hand--to fix her in place and to make sure she's too distracted to look at his face. He then leaves the hotel, first gently kicking the baby's finger into the crack in the elevator and thinking about how he'll come back some day to drop crumbs and pieces of candy into that blackness (you know--for the baby growing from the finger).

The story opens with, "I have seen a baby finger on the gleaming tile floor of a hotel lobby. The air was full of screaming," which is a hell of an attention-grabber. The pacing is perfect--the narrator describes and ruminates about the baby and his finger without giving any context right up to the precipice of potential reader frustration, then he starts talking about the murder. He walks us through that, including the various ritual elements compelled by his OCD, which quickly brings us right back to the opening and the question of how he's going to escape. That non-linear structure gives us enough time with the narrator's surprisingly warm and empathetic voice that we're on his side before we realize he's a serial killer. I was so firmly on his side, in fact, that I laughed when the mother sticks her hand in the doorjamb and he's like, "Oh, hey, great, I can just close the door on *her* hand, too!" As a writer, I also found it interesting that the entire story takes place over the minute or so after this guy has accidentally severed the baby's finger, and most of it takes place in his mind as either flashbacks or glimpses of an entirely hypothetical future. This is a really good story.

Speaking of good stories, "Good Help," by Karen Runge, is a plain spoken contemporary horror story that is almost entirely a model-telling. The subjective first person narrator, Ruth, is a caretaker at an old folks' home, and she walks us through a typical day with her patient, Solomon, who is unable to move or speak. The tone is pretty innocuous at the beginning, with Ruth dressing him, taking him to the bathroom, and feeding him breakfast. There are some hints of where it's going--"Be careful, Solomon," I'll say, digging my fingers into the frail bones of his shoulders. "We don't want to fall, do we?" and, "I don't like to pinch his nose to make him swallow them, but I will if I have to"--but nothing explicit. Then, after breakfast, Ruth casually mentions that she'll tease Solomon sometimes--only if she gets bored, of course--by showing him her breasts and vagina. Then the torture begins in earnest, with Ruth taunting him about all the cheating his wife did, underfeeding him and overheating him and giving him drugs he doesn't need. At the end, she thinks about how he'll die someday soon, and they'll all wonder how he managed to kick his blankets off in the middle of the night. Solomon's family will thank her for her service and give her a big bonus, and she'll get some time off work to grieve. The last line is: "I hope I get a woman, next time."

One of the best things about "Good Help" is the way the tension builds slowly, with Ruth seeming quite sane and reasonable, but with those occasional hints of what might be sadism and might just be conscientious care. It's similar to what Jones does with the narrator's voice in "You Are Here," making Ruth seem so patient and reasonable that when she starts teasing Solomon you're almost taken aback (although Jones uses it to different effect, given that opening with a baby's severed finger means the reader is at pretty much maximum tension from the get-

go). One of the things that makes this story so effective as horror is the fact that it's a model-telling--as you're getting to the sicker stuff, you realize that Ruth has done this before and that she's planning to do it again. Another is the use of gesture, limited as it may be, in the form of Solomon's facial expressions. He can't move or speak, but he's present enough to give her hateful glares, even to cry. She's not torturing a vegetable. The mundane nature of the setting, and of the torture, for the most part, works really well, too. We're all going to get old, many of us have older relatives who end up in these kinds of homes, and this is something that could very easily happen. (And surely does.) Another strong story.

Rating: 2. They're open to submissions from anyone, but most of the writers in the issues I've read have had pretty impressive bios. They're also biannual, which means they publish around twenty stories per year, and at least some of those slots are going to people like Stephen Graham Jones. Worth keeping an eye on, though. Or just reading, because it's really quite good.