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INTRODUCTION

BY ERIC J. GUIGNARD

I FIRST READ STEVE RASNIC TEM WHEN I WAS IN high school, about 1993 or '94. The story was “Hungry,” included in the anthology *Borderlands 3* from Tom Monteleone. I remember all the stories in that anthology struck me as strange, unsettling things, eye-opening in that they were fantastic and bizarre while still being literary. Steve’s stood out, however, not only for its portraiture of sad, poignant family life of an outcast (and also because it involved backstory of carnie sideshows, which particularly enamored me at that time!), but also that the story was honest and heartfelt, even with such an unusual, surreal ending; I “felt” for this impossible character.

It’s also the reason I included “Hungry” as the opening story in this mini collection—it was my first introduction to Steve, and so I offer it herein as the same doorway for other readers who may not have yet encountered his work; I happen to like there’s a nice synchronicity in that.

After reading “Hungry” I came across an older work of Steve’s, “Motherson,” included in the 1989 anthology *Masques III* from J.N. Williamson. I don’t recall that I entirely understood it at the time, and I loved it for that reason. It’s another piece that’s amorphous and disquieting, provocative in its portrait of Joel and Samson as they discuss their nameless mothers.

And after “Motherson”? Maybe I’d read next the terrifying “Bodies and Heads” in John Skipp’s *Book of the Dead*; maybe it was the weird-though-rewarding “Angel Combs” in 1995’s *Year’s Best Annual of Fantasy and Horror*; maybe it was the moving “In the Trees,” in Stephen Jones’ magazine, *Fantasy Tales*. Of course by now I lose count how many stories of Steve’s that I’ve come across in magazines and books ever since those formative days of “adult” teenage reading, though what’s never been lost on me is their impact.

See, to put this in perspective, in high school I was in honors English courses, studying tracks on “Women in Victorian Literature” that included such less-than-thrilling fare as *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Madame Bovary* (amongst many, many others of Puritan heroines anchored by the moors of society and class boundaries), while in my free time I was devouring mass market horror paperbacks such as by Stephen King and Dean Koontz. In no way could I ever see the literary integrity of high-minded classics find a middle ground with the mainstream tastes of horror or pulpy genre fiction . . .

Until I read Steve Rasnic Tem.

And that sentiment is only reinforced to me as I now broach my forties and put together this book you hold in hand (or view on-screen). As I review Steve’s bibliography—a stupendous 400+ short stories, working with such luminaries as Isaac Asimov, Stan Lee, David Copperfield, et al., not to mention nearly every great fiction publication and editor involved in the last thirty years—I recall the stories I’ve read and their impression on me. It wouldn’t be honest to claim I “like” everything he’s written, but nor can I say I’ve ever been disappointed. Steve always fills his tales with emotion, with imagination, and with significance. The sheer magnitude alone of his output is remarkable; Steve Rasnic Tem’s been selling short fiction since about 1976, roughly as long as I’ve

been alive, which to me puts him up somewhere in the stratum between *Inspirer* and *Hero*.

NYT bestselling author Dan Simmons calls Steve “A rare treasure,” and author-icon Joe R. Lansdale praises Steve as “A school of writing unto himself.” Publishers Weekly has written of Steve, “He has found a perfect balance between the bizarre and the straight-forward,” and Library Journal called him “one of the most distinctive voices in imaginative literature.”

Steve Rasnic Tem has won the Bram Stoker, International Horror Guild, British Fantasy, and World Fantasy Awards, not to mention the numerous nominations and recommendations he’s garnered for nearly every other speculative fiction writing award.

And on top of that, he was kind enough to participate in this project, the first “Primer” I hope to release showcasing diverse modern voices around the world of leading dark fiction short stories.

Following is just an introduction to Steve, and I hope you’ll conclude wanting only to search out more.

Midnight cheers,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric J. Guignard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

—Eric J. Guignard
Chino Hills, California
April 22, 2017



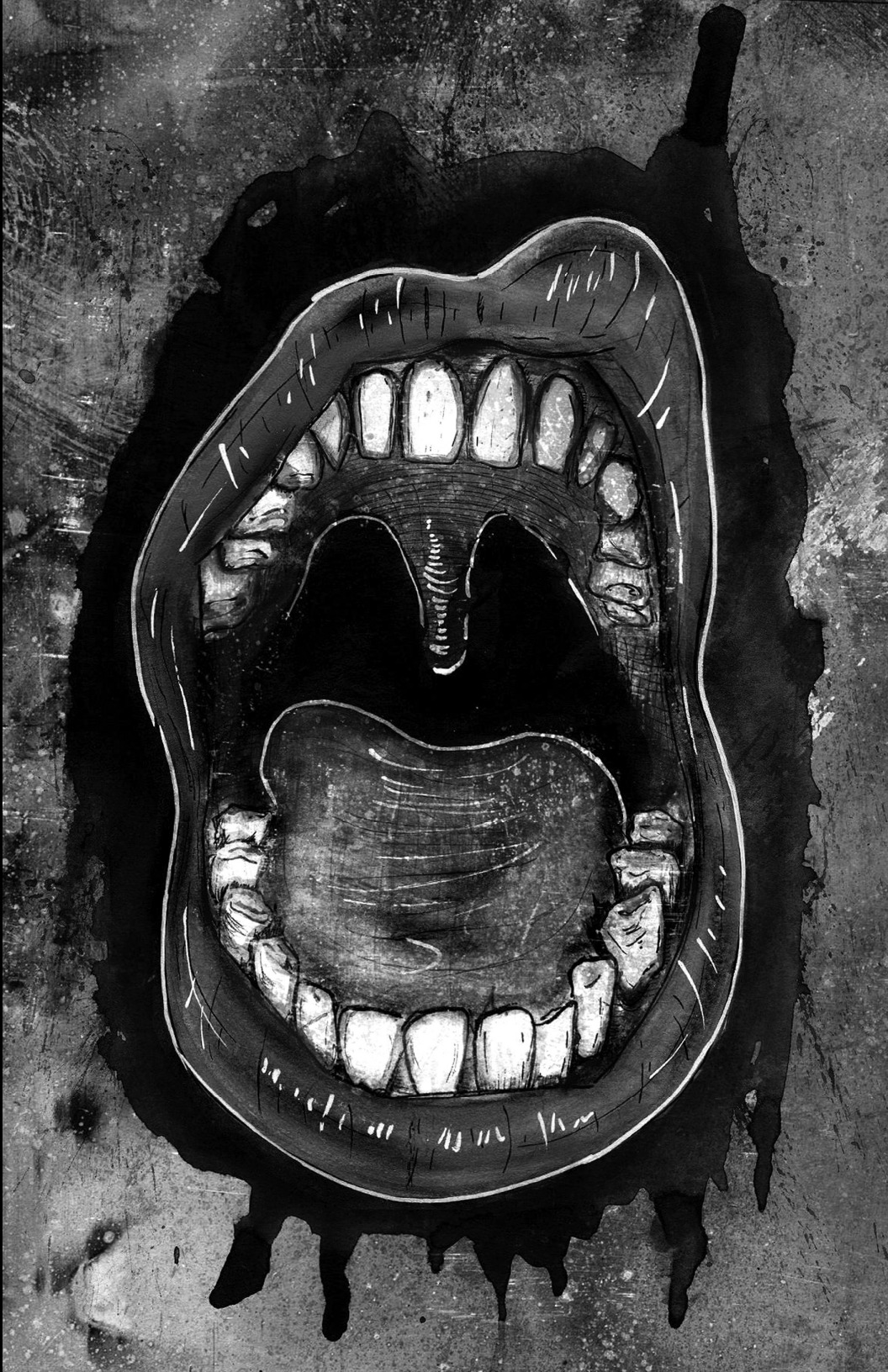
STEVE RASNIC TEM: A BIOGRAPHY

STEVE RASNIC TEM'S COLLABORATIVE NOVELLA with his late wife Melanie Tem, *The Man on the Ceiling*, won the World Fantasy, Bram Stoker, and International Horror Guild awards in 2001. He has also won the Bram Stoker, International Horror Guild, and British Fantasy Awards for his solo work. His novella *In the Lovecraft Museum* (PS Publishing, 2015) was a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award. His novel *UBO* (Solaris, February 2017) is a dark science fictional tale about violence and its origins, featuring such historical viewpoint characters as Jack the Ripper, Stalin, and Heinrich Himmler. Steve's novel *Blood Kin* (Solaris, March 2014), won the 2014 Bram Stoker Award. His previous novels are *Deadfall Hotel* (Solaris, 2012), *The Man on the Ceiling* (Wizards of the Coast Discoveries, 2008, written with Melanie Tem as an expansion of their novella), *The Book of Days* (Subterranean, 2002), *Daughters* (Grand Central, 2001, also written with Melanie Tem), and *Excavation* (Avon, 1987). A handbook on writing, *Yours to Tell: Dialogues on the Art & Practice of Fiction*, also written with Melanie, appeared in April from Apex Books.

Steve has published over four hundred short stories. His first

collection of stories, *Ombres sur la Route*, was published by the French publisher Denoël in 1994. His first English language collection, *City Fishing* (Silver Salamander, 2000) won the International Horror Guild Award. His other story collections are *The Far Side of the Lake* (Ash Tree, 2001), *In Concert* (Centipede, 2010—collaborations with Melanie Tem), *Ugly Behavior* (New Pulp, 2012—noir fiction), *Onion Songs* (Chomu, 2013), *Celestial Inventories* (ChiZine, 2013), *Twember* (NewCon, 2013—science fiction), *Here with the Shadows* (Swan River Press, 2014), and last year's giant 72-story treasury, *Out of the Dark: A Storybook of Horrors*, from Centipede Press, featuring the best of his uncollected horror.

Steve was born in Lee County, Virginia, in the heart of Appalachia. He studied comparative literature and playwriting at Virginia Commonwealth, and received a Bachelor's in English Education from Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI). He moved to Colorado in the mid-seventies and received a Master's in Creative Writing from Colorado State University, studying poetry under Bill Tremblay and fiction under Warren Fine. Thereafter he joined the Northern Colorado Writer's Workshop coordinated by Ed Bryant. Over the years the members of this workshop have included Connie Willis, Cynthia Felice, Dan Simmons, Vic Milan, Wil McCarthy, and many other fantasy and science fiction writers. He met his wife Melanie in that workshop and moved to Denver. Melanie passed away in 2015. He currently lives in Centennial, Colorado and has four children and six grandchildren.



HUNGRY

MAMA?

VIVIAN SPARKS TOOK HER HANDS OUT OF THE soapy water and stared into the frosted kitchen window. There was a face in the ice and fog, but she wasn't sure which of her dead children it was. Amy or Henry, maybe—they'd had the smallest heads, like early potatoes, and about that same color. Those hadn't been their *real* names, of course. Ray always felt it was wrong to name a stillborn, so they didn't get a name writ down on paper, but still she had named every one of them in her heart: Amy, Henry, Becky, Sue Ann, and Patricia, after her mother. Patricia had been the smallest, not even full-made really, like part of her had been left behind in the dark somewhere. Ray had wanted Patricia took right away and buried on the back hill, he'd been so mad about the way she came out. But the midwife had helped Vivian bathe the poor little thing and wrap her up, and she'd looked so much like a dead kitten or a calf that it made it a whole lot worse than the others, so dark and wet and wrinkled that Vivian almost regretted not letting Ray do what he'd wanted.

Mama . . .

But it wasn't the dead ones, not this time. A mother knows the voice of her child, and Vivian Sparks felt ashamed to have denied it. It felt bad, always hearing the dead ones and never expecting the one she'd have given up anything for, no matter what Ray said. Ray wouldn't have let her adopt him, if it hadn't

been for those stillborns, but she would have done it on her own if she had to, even if she'd had ten other children to care for. It was her own darling Jimmie Lee out there in the cold foggy morning. It had to be.

Vivian opened the back door and looked out onto the bare dirt yard that led uphill to the lopsided gray barn. Ray's lantern flickered in there where he was checking on the cows. She couldn't see much else because of the dark, and the fog. It was still trying real hard to be Spring here in late March—she'd caught a whiff of lilac breeze yesterday afternoon—but it worried her that the hard frost was going to put an end to that early flowering before she'd see any blossoms. That was always a bad sign when the lilacs came out too soon and the ice killed the hope of them.

“Mama, it's me.”

Vivian reached up and touched her throat, trying to help a good swallow along. Suddenly her throat felt as if it were full of food, and she just couldn't get it all down. Ray said it was because of Jimmie Lee, her problem with eating, said it had been like that for her ever since Jimmie Lee came into their lives. “You don't eat right no more. I guess you can't,” he said over and over, the way he repeated something to death when he had a mad feeling about it. “Can't say that I even blame you—it's understandable. Watchin' him go at it, it'd put anybody off their food. That's why I never watched.”

She guessed there was truth in what he said, but she didn't like to think about it that way. What she liked to think was that it was all her feelings for Jimmie Lee coming up into her throat when she'd looked at him, or now when she thought about him, all the sadness and the love that made it hard for her to breathe, much less eat. And the memory of him touching her on her throat, gazing at her mouth the night before he left home to join that awful show. That was another reason for her to be touching her throat now, in that same place.

“Mama, I come back to visit.”

Vivian could hardly speak. Maybe the love in her throat was so big it was closing up her windpipe. “Come on, come . . . on, honey. Been a long time.”

Past the east fence she could see the darkness gray a little and move away. She started to walk over but a simple yet awful sound—a young man clearing his throat—stopped her. She clutched the huge lump in her throat. It was warm, as if it might burn her fingers.

“Mama, I ate something off the road a while back. I just gotta get rid of it, then I’ll come up where you can see me.”

She turned her back to him even though it would have been much too dark to see what he was about to do. But after watching him a thousand times when he was little she felt like he was a grown boy now, and deserved some show of respect, and she wasn’t sure but maybe this was one way to do it. At the same time she knew her turning away wasn’t all being the good mama, either. She didn’t want to see it anymore. She didn’t feel like she should have to.

Back in the darkness there was a sound like damp skin stretching, splitting, some awful coughs and gurglings like her son’s throat was turning itself inside out (dear God, it’s got *worse!*) and then a loud, mushy thump.

A few minutes later she could hear him walking up behind her. “I’m sorry, mama.” His voice was hoarse, like he’d been crying. He used to cry all the time when he was little, complaining all the time about being so hungry, and never getting full no matter how much she fed him, how much Ray let her feed him, or however much Jimmie Lee ate on his own to try to fill that awful hunger. His nose would run and his eyes would look all raw and scraped and he’d stop trying to keep himself clean. Vivian took a handkerchief out of her front apron pocket now and turned around to give it to him.

“Thanks, mama. I’ll get good and clean for you, just for you.” The young man standing in front of her, saying just what he used to say to her when he was a little boy and had made himself such an awful mess, was taller, surely, and had little scraggly patches of beard here and there where once had been unnaturally pink skin, but other than that he still seemed the pale, skinny little boy who had left her years ago. His chin was covered with thick, soupy slobber which he wiped off with the handkerchief. She didn’t mind—that had always been her job, to provide the handkerchiefs, the towels, waiting patiently while he cleaned himself up, directing him now and then to a missed spot or two. Ray had never been able to stand even that little bit of clean up; he’d always just left the room.

“My goodness!” She made herself sound impressed, although what she was really feeling was relieved, and desperate to hug him to her. “My *handsome* older son.”

Jimmie Lee grinned then, showing teeth even worse than she remembered. She could see that at least he’d been able to get some dental work done, but it looked like the fillings and braces had been filed, points added here and there to make him look more like a silly machine, some big city kitchen gadget of some kind. She wondered if it really helped him get the food down or if it was all just for some sideshow or movie work he’d been doing. He’d written her once about one of the movies—“Flesh Eaters From Beyond Mars,” or some such silliness. He’d said in the letter that the movie people liked him because he saved them money on special effects, but she’d never really understood what any of that was about.

Other than the metal in his mouth her sweet boy hadn’t changed much. Certainly he couldn’t weigh much more now than when he’d left her: his body straight up and down like a sleeve with no hips or shoulders to speak of, but his neck about twice as wide as it should be, and faintly ringed, like a snake’s belly. Set atop that

stout neck was the largest jaw she'd ever seen—it hung out like the birdbath on top the pedestal she had out in the front flowerbed. His mouth was wider than normal, she guessed, but had never seemed as big as it should be for that size jaw. His lips were almost blue, and cracked, and there were a bunch more splits in the skin at the corners of his mouth. Because of all the stretching his skin had to do there, hair growth had always been spotty. She'd tried to get him to use lotions and oils, but like most children he just forgot all the time. So she'd always rub some into his face every night, being especially careful around the mouth and chin. She wondered if he knew somebody now who cared enough to do that for him.

His eyes were the wide eyes of a lost child's, but then they always had been. Jimmie Lee now was just a larger version of the poor baby that had been born in a backwoods barn and just left there eighteen years before. No one else had wanted the funny looking child but Vivian had known from the very first moment she saw him that this was *her* son, and would be forever. Even Ray, for all his puffin' and embarrassment about the boy, had resented it when one of the neighbors suggested that maybe they shouldn't keep him. This was *his* son, even though sometimes he sorely couldn't stand being around him.

And then Jimmie Lee had gone out into the world, maybe to find his "real" mother, or maybe to find whatever it was he was hungry for. She didn't know, and was afraid then, and was afraid now, to ask. All she'd had to remember him by was this awful swelling in her throat every time she thought of him, and every time she struggled to eat or drink something. But nobody'd ever told her that life was fair to mothers.

"Did you ever find her, son?"

"Who, mama?"

"Why, the one who gave birth to you. The one who just left you here all them years ago." She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice, but the vein went too wide and deep to hide.

EXPLORING DARK SHORT FICTION #1: A PRIMER TO STEVE RASNIC TEM

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