

Third Prize, Grades 7-8

“Straw Terror”
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Upon the breeze that October night, there fluttered something unearthly alongside the autumn leaves—a vague, unnamable thing, whose very presence held a distinct suggestion of the melancholy and malevolent. God’s creatures, bipeds, and birds and beasts alike, hastened to their homes with mutual urgency. The people, as they walked rapidly down the streets, glanced about themselves in a state of unease for which they knew no reason, unaware as they were of the thing that watched them from the cornfield.

The Earth-wise creatures, the *animals*, as the foolish, furless-no-wings dubbed them, knew what it was that afflicted everyone in such a precise yet terrifying manner, and they called out to one another in panicked warnings that spoke as a singular voice. The humans did not listen, for all they could discern was noise. A few paused and cocked their heads and a glazed expression hinting at nostalgia came over their faces as they struggled to understand the forgotten tongue. But they presently shook their heads free of these thoughts and continued all the faster into their homes.

The children, however, whose minds were not clouded by selfishness and sums and complicated worries understood the message and pulled their parents inside with words of begging uttered with a seriousness that bordered on comical in the opinions of their elders. For they had not forgotten how to listen and through the incessant noise of the animals, the howls of the dogs, the cries of the birds and the neighs of the stallions, they heard the message.

He walks tonight! He takes one tonight! He is lonely, he will make a friend! He may take two! Hide away in your homes and protect yourselves from him! He walks tonight! He walks tonight!

Even the wind with its constant moaning and shrieking whistles seemed to speak of impending danger as it blew doors closed and compelled folks to snap their windows shut as their candles were extinguished by the fierce gale. As the last door slammed behind the final straggler, the wind died down and flew off to its own hiding place, a place that, save for the butterflies and bees, had been seen by no mortal creature.

The sky darkened, throwing the world into shadows and dimness, and animals that had dared to stay out of their nests and burrows and other such places now bolted for cover. No predators struck down their prey; no dogs nipped at the horses; no scavengers looted the stronger animals’ food stocks. A fox took a wandering rabbit into its own den, sheltering it away from the opening and hissing in its own language that it was to leave by the morning, when the natural order was restored. The cows in the pastures laid down side by side, pressed together, keeping watch with their wide, knowing eyes, not daring to

make a sound. A stray cat nudged a lost and terrified mouse into the hole it had been searching for and then took refuge in a doghouse.

And in this way the world grew silent, waiting, waiting for the terrible darkness that was blacker than shadow, the walking sadness that would stop at nothing to put a stop to the horrid, perpetual loneliness that plagued its existence.

The corn in the field was pushed back by strong hands that should have been weak as he, as *it*, abandoned his post. He left a trail as he walked, losing bits and pieces of himself with every movement, but he didn't stop to collect what he dropped. He walked on, straight ahead, towards the town where he knew children were pulling the blankets up over their heads.

The rabbit and the fox pressed themselves against the very back wall of the den, huddled together in anticipation and fear. The cows began to bay mournfully, the calves shrinking back into the haystacks and *mooing* fearfully. The hound, in the doghouse with the cat, growled at what it knew was just outside and with its paw pushed its newly acquired tenant towards the back of the small dwelling, further into safety.

And still the world waited, holding its breath, knowing what was coming. A scream tore the air, and the wind in its hiding place shuddered, rustling the grass as the gaslights came on in one of the houses. There was the sound of feet hitting the floor, and then the frantic cries of a mother fruitlessly calling her child's name and the creak of a safe opening as the missing boy's father took out his gun. Doors opened everywhere as neighbors sprang from their beds and, all over the town, were calling for the unfortunate child and trying to ignore the horror that was creeping into their hearts and chilling them to their very cores.

And as they searched, shouted and consoled the sobbing and shrieking woman, no one noticed the two scarecrows that stood in the field where there had only been one.