

Fiction section

Edited by **Joe Gray**

Joe is a field naturalist and conservationist who lives on the island of Great Britain. He writes eco-fiction under the pen name Dewey Dabbar.

At a time of great uncertainty about the future conditions that life is going to face on Earth, even in the near term, and when readers of non-fiction are increasingly wearied by facts and growing warier by the day of misinformation, fiction offers a powerful alternative means of conveying messages of deep import, be they ones that will help shift mindsets or those that will directly inspire action.

Stuffed heads

Jamie McGill

They were alive, but no one knew. Adorned with colorful beads and plastic glasses, no one but me knew that they were more than objects on display. Their stillness was deceptive, but their plastic eyes saw the indifference and mockery of the humans that passed. Their heads were stuffed with cotton but retained the memory of the gunshots and the pain, and the beauty of the life that they led before. I've stared at these creatures for hours every day from my seat at the cash register, in the hell that was the antique store where I spent my days, waiting for customers that rarely appeared, offering the deer my silent and insignificant apologies for the damage caused by my species. They stared back at me with judgment.

They spoke to me. They filled my head with images of the lives taken from them, scenes of grazing in vast meadows, of the fawns abandoned, the friends and family whom they had loved. They had all the freedom and serenity in the world. And then scenes of the end. The fear and confusion. Running through the home that was theirs, away from invaders who shot at them with metal sticks and who filled their peaceful forest with deafening and terrifying noises. And then I would be transported beyond just watching their history unfold. I would feel the pain that was unbearable, that knocked me over and left me breathless. The fire that would appear in my side, slowly draining the life from my body, hot thick blood oozing from my injury.

I can see and hear a form coming closer to me, my heart pounding and my legs twitching, but I am unable to escape. I can hardly move. I am crippled by pain and paralyzed by terror. The monster is growing larger and larger, and the sound of their feet stomping on the leaves destroying everything in my world grows louder and louder until they loom over me and stick a knife in me. This is the pain that is worst of all, but it lasts only a second.

Then I would awaken. Still upright, my body intact and free of pain. I am transported back to the store, hearing the quiet music playing and smelling the scent of old books and moldy clothing. And the clock on the wall would show me that no time had passed. I would resume watching customers, all of them oblivious to the horror that surrounded them, or just continue with some meaningless task.

These visions were brought to me seemingly at random, perhaps when it became impossible for the creatures to contain all their trauma, or perhaps when their rage became so all-consuming and explosive that they had to inflict it on another. Who better than me, who felt their pain but did nothing to end it, and who cared, but not enough to help.

Sometimes they were sold. I would dismount the heads from the wall, bringing the deer to the customer. These creatures were destined to hang above mantles for the rest of time. I would touch their soft pelts, feel their weight, and sense the hatred directed at me and everyone else who observed them. All who noticed their suffering and refused to destroy what was left of them and finally allow them peace. I would wrap them in paper and accept the value that was placed on their lives. And when they were gone, a weight was lifted off my chest. Of the hundreds that filled the store, one less existed here to haunt me. The soul that was purchased would move on to a new space with new humans to possess. To people who may not notice their wrath but who would be poisoned, nonetheless, by their presence.

About the author

Jamie McGill, a student at Algoma University, writes short fiction that hinges on themes of veganism and animal liberation.