


ALLYSON BIRD



BULL RUNNING
FOR GIRLS

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DEDICATION

To the memory of my mother
Laura Shakespeare.
And my sister Sylvia Insley.
I miss you.

“To live is to war with trolls
In the holds of the heart and mind;
To write is to hold
Judgement Day over the self.”
Henrik Ibsen.

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To the other editors who have all introduced my prose to the world, Sarah Dobbs and Lee Harris—amongst others. Thank you to Andrew Hook in the discussion of *The Silk Road*. Also to Chris Teague who will be publishing my next story, *For You Faustine*, in *Triquorum*.

Almost all the stories in the collection are original except for—*Blood in Madness Ran* published in *Hunger* 2006. *Wings of Night* first appeared in *Hub* 2007. *Shadow upon Shadow* in *Black Petals* 2008. *Dissolution* is to appear in *The Third BHF Book of Horror Stories* 2008. *The Silk Road* will appear in *The British Fantasy Society publication—New Horizons* 2008.

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BIRD OF PREY

An introduction by Gary McMahon

We all have our preferences. For example, I like listening to female vocalists, I love watching good actresses perform in films, and I enjoy reading genre fiction written by women – I feel it can often show me the genre from a different angle, and perhaps offer insights a man might not necessarily have noticed. In the male-dominated arena of horror fiction, it's a rare treat to see a new female writer come along to stir things up. And that's exactly what Allyson Bird is trying to do with these stories: stir things up.

I'm not sure why, but it is mostly men who write horror—maybe the male mindset is drawn more to the darker genres; maybe women simply aren't as enamoured of horror and its themes; maybe I'm talking out of my hat...

I first met Ally at a literary convention in Derby, where she came up and introduced herself. She's a smiley, likeable lady who tends to babble a bit when she's nervous, and looks nothing at all like the clichéd image of a female horror writer. No tattoos (that I'm aware of), no black leather, no pseudo-Goth trappings. Another thing I like about Allyson Bird is the fact that she's a proud wife and mother. Family is important to her, and this comes through in her writing, the tales she chooses to tell and the characters she uses to do so. She also likes art, poetry, Guinness and travel. And she loves to write horror fiction.

The stories in the collection you now hold in your hands are rich and varied, and if there is a single unifying theme it seems

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to me that it might be the idea of (usually strong, or at least self-reliant) women characters being drawn slowly into another world they do not quite understand. A place far darker than—and dangerous in different ways from—the world we all know, yet still recognisably an aspect of our own existence.

From a child in peril to a story partly set in ancient Pompeii, this variation of themes and settings ably demonstrates the width and depth of the author's interests. Along the way there's some thinly disguised autobiography, like the nightclub-hopping *femme fatal* in *Wings of Night* and the chilling hotel setting of *The Bone Grinder*; and the death of loved ones (loss and grief are certainly common themes in the book) hangs heavy in *Silence is Golden* and *Medium Strange*. Reading these often intimate narratives one has a sense that the writer is working through her own demons as well as telling a tale. *The Caul Bearer* proves that Bird isn't averse to some full-tilt Lovecraftian horror, yet even here her love of poetry is never far from the surface. Childhood, by way of rhymes or fairytales, is constantly evoked; there is a sense of innocence being transformed into experience and all we can do is read on, steeling ourselves for what might happen next to characters we have begun to care about without even realising.

Taken as a whole, *Bull Running for Girls* represents a snapshot of the work of a promising writer at the very start of her career, still struggling to find her true voice and grappling with themes she will no doubt spend the rest of her life attempting to examine. We forgive the occasional miss-step because very quickly we grow to trust the author to keep us on the right path as she leads us towards her personal fears...and make no mistake; this journey is an essential one into what is fundamentally an *essential* darkness.

The ghostly and metaphorical visitations of *Shadow Upon Shadow* hint at this other world I mentioned earlier, showing us its outer edges, and by the time we confront the "evil thing" that prowls *Deathside* (one of the shortest and most assured offerings in the book), we have one foot firmly in that world,

Bird of Prey

planted in the cold earth of a dark land filled with menace and universal terrors. By then, of course, it is far too late to retreat, for Allyson Bird has succeeded nobly in her task. She has stirred things up, shaken us with her fiction: moved and unnerved us enough and in such an enjoyable manner that we'll gladly take the small, pale outstretched hand and go bull running with this particular girl—a girl who knows all the good stories and isn't afraid to tell them.

Gary McMahon

Leeds

2008

THE CAUL BEARER

“They were alive with a teeming horde of shapes swimming inward towards the town: and even at my vast distance and in my single moment of perception I could tell that the bobbing heads and flailing arms were alien and aberrant in a way scarcely to be expressed or consciously formulated.” *The Shadow over Innsmouth* by H. P. Lovecraft.

Like the webfoot cockle women trudging out of a Dylan Thomas black, bandaged night, the flither girls made their way across Robin Hood’s bay (or Baytown as the locals called it) to find limpets to use for bait on long lines. This wasn’t a fishing village in Wales but it could have been, with the small fisher houses and the narrow, cobbled lanes in between. There were nets to be mended lying strewn around the cottage entrances, as if to capture land animals as they entered and left. Nets, stretched like cauls over the windows and on the front of the walls. A strong odour hung in the air from the fish that had been left to dry. Part of the wild village had already fallen into the sea, demolished by the north-easterly winter storms. Brid’s mother had told her of the houses on King Street that had leaned over the cliff and tumbled into the sea a few decades ago.

Bridgette Moorsom was a caul bearer. She had been born with a caul over her face and the midwife had pressed a piece of paper over the membrane, so that the caul stuck to it, and then it had been given to the mother as an heirloom. The possession of

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caul was said to protect the bearer from death by drowning. Brid had it in a small box on her dressing table; she had never given it away. Why should she? A few sailors had offered a fortune for its protection but she had never parted with it. Brid had meant to give it to her fiancé on their wedding day. Oh why hadn't she given it to him before?

A marriage had been arranged and then put to one side like the wedding dress that hung in her mother's closet. Brid had no need of it anymore. She had been going to marry Benjamin Eskell but he had been lost to the sea a few months earlier. Brid's mother had been muttering on that Brid should have married Tom; Ben's brother, except that Tom was unhelpfully married already.

A cold grey mist crept in from the sea towards the huddled houses of the small village and then wound its way up each street, first to the right along the one terrace, then after the length of it to the left and along again, turning at each bend like a sea dragon searching for a lair, or a lost soul reaching for a forgotten memory. Brid followed the trail to the top of the hill, to the little cottage she shared with her mother. All the way along she was thinking about her lost lover and how she longed to be reunited with him again. Even death held no fear for her, she only wanted reunion. What could be wrong with that?

Once inside the cottage she nodded to her mother, who sat by the fire knitting a jumper. Each jumper served a two fold purpose, the first was obviously for warmth, the second in that each village had a unique pattern. It was how they identified and claimed their dead from the sea. Wives even put mistakes in the garment so that it was particular to a family. When Brid's fiancée had been found, his face had been bitten away by fish and the pattern had proven that he was of their village of Bay Town. Brid could not look at that jumper.

"I'm off to bed."

"That's all you seem to want to do these days Brid. You go to your room and you never talk to me."

"There's nothing much to talk about mother."

"You're young; there will be plenty for you to do in the

future. Sit down here with me Brid. I've hardly talked to anyone all day."

"I need to change out of these wet clothes."

"I suppose," responded her mother. "They look dry enough to me already—where have you been?"

"To the Bay Hotel."

Helen gave her an honest stare that was full of reproach. "We can't afford to squander our money Brid."

Brid felt so wound up, so wanting to let go of her anger.

"Afford, we can't afford anything mother. I'm sick of the work, sick of the poverty. I couldn't afford to lose a man, but I did, and I know you want me to find another one to replace him, so we can afford things."

"It's not my fault that the men in this family either go away or die in the sea," replied her mother.

"No, it's not your fault at all—but if you hadn't driven father to work harder all the time and moaned at him whenever he gave you any kindness perhaps he wouldn't have left."

"He might come back!"

"We both know that will never happen, just as my Ben won't be coming back either!"

Brid's mother was knitting furiously at this point as if every stab of the needle would make a hole in her worries. "There's some fried fish on the table," she muttered in a begrudging tone.

Brid gave her mother a look of disdain, took one of the candles from the shelf next to the fireplace, lit it from the main candle near her mother and left the room. She was tired of fighting, fighting her mother, the cold winter, and her grief.

Her room smelt of the sea and Brid had found some old bits of fishing nets and hung them from the beams. Faded ribbons and cradled mementos, love notes and tokens from the previous year, hung in mid air as if waiting on the unseen hand of her lover to present them once more. That would never happen again Brid knew. She wondered if she would ever find anything interesting to hang in the nets again. She noticed dark pools of water over in the centre of the wooden boards and the curtain

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billowed unexpectedly despite the window being closed.

The cold had got into her bones and she started to shiver. Under the window was a small chest of drawers. Brid rummaged around in the bottom of one and pulled out a half empty bottle of gin. She took out the stopper with some difficulty. She always felt guilty when she had been drinking and when she had enough she always drove the stopper home with the intention of making it more difficult to get at the next time. It never was difficult, for she always managed in the end.

Brid slept badly that night. There are states of mind and sleep that negate any active response. It wasn't a sweet repose, more a dream with the dead.

The wind was howling around the outer buildings, screeching around the rooftops and chimneys like a scavenging northern wraith. The fishermen and their families slept fitfully in their cots. Brid fumbled at the bedclothes and cried out in her sleep. She was unaware of the green phosphorescence in her room which clung to the floor, wove its way along the boards and then stretched its tendrils towards, and beneath the crumpled sheets. In her dreams she floated beneath the viridian sea, fighting off the levellers of the deep and losing. In the morning there was blood on her nightgown. She made excuses that it was badly soiled because it was a heavy month and her mother let it be when Brid helped with the washing.

Each hour of her existence was an agony of delusion and nightmare. The future was something Brid rarely thought about these days—work and sleeping and barely being bothered to eat. She could simply walk into the sea and never come out. What was the point of living if it was this hard?

Families helped each other out in Baytown, the Moorsom and the Eskells (originally an old Scandinavian family) had married each other for generations and her marriage had been going to be one more to strengthen the bond between them. Brid gathered bait and helped with the fish and the Eskells helped her mother and herself in little ways. Tom had been going to be her brother-in-law and he still felt an obligation. He lived three doors along

with his wife, who was about to give birth.

A cold, wintry morning called for as many layers of clothing as she could find, to wrap around her and still work in, without being too restricted and then it was down to the shoreline and across to Boggle Hole and beyond to get the limpets at low tide. As she made her way past Eskell cottage she caught sight of Jenna, Tom's wife, through the small dark window. There was no mistaking that it was Jenna due to the size of her swollen stomach, she was due to give birth any day now. Brid bit down hard on her bottom lip trying to push aside her jealousy. She might have had been with child now if the sea hadn't taken her Benjamin.

Brid, unlike the rest of the flither girls, preferred to gather the bait on her own and on that particular day she lingered around Boggle Hole rather than follow the rest of the girls over the hills. They travelled away from the sea-beaten cottages and down to the other bays. Also, she was tired of their incessant gossip. Her heart wasn't in anything—she could only think of Ben. She caught glimpses of his scowling face in the rockpools framed by the brown seaweed and she imagined she felt the light touch of a hand on the back of hers as she prised the limpets off the rock. Brid stabbed at the limpets venting all her anger on them until she caught her left hand with one lunge and her blood splashed the dark shells. Brid ignored the pain. She stood up, threw a handful of the limpets into a basket, arched her aching back, and looked out at the black sea. The sea was almost as dark as night and the sky was only a shade lighter, just enough to work by. Out there, was where the fishermen came to grief near landmarks called Farside's Out and Ower Robin a Trum and she wondered if it were possible for dead fishermen, and sailors to return from the sea.

The wind whipped up and the ocean began to get rougher, flinging spray in her face as the tide came in. Part of her wished it would. She imagined herself cut off by the tide, freeing her of her drudgery. The rain pelted her arms and legs and she pushed her black hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand. Salt had

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dried her lips and made them bleed. Just as she was turning to go back along the shoreline, a little of the soft, clay cliff face to her left fell away. Brid looked up to see if more would follow but nothing else looked as if it was going to slip. There was just a small channel of mud and water sluicing down.

Something solid caught her eye. Most of it was sticking out of the cliff face and at first she just thought it was one of the rocks. Brid, taking care not to slip on the sea-worn boulders, went to investigate. The rain became harder and the cold sting of it on her face made her curse under her breath but she reached up, on tip toe, for the small wooden casket and gave it a pull. It didn't budge with the first tug and she almost slipped, but with the second the soft wet clay came away, and she caught the box as it fell. It was less than her arm's length long but quite light so she placed it in her large flither basket and made her way back across the foreshore before the tide cut her off from the Wayfoot, just below the Bay Hotel.

When the tide was out you could walk all the way across Stoupe Beck Sands to Ravenscar; she'd done that often enough, but not today. Many a wreck lay off the Ravenscar headland, hundreds of years of them, sailors and fishermen had been washed up on that shore, and their bodies harvested by the scavengers of the deep. Men in their pale mottled skin with slivers of flesh hanging from them. They were so rotten you could peel out the spine of the fishermen as easily as with fish.

The flither basket with its tiny cargo began to feel heavy. Brid slipped on the stones as she hurried to beat the tide, but she managed it well enough across the water's edge and up the cobble causeway to the Bay Hotel. The sea had more than once pounded the hotel in the terrible winter storms and hurled the tiny coble boats against the windows of the inn but not today, although the sea was getting rougher. It was at the hotel that Brid sought shelter. Once through the door which banged loudly behind her she moved silently over to the fire and sat down beside it. She took off her sodden shawl and her black jacket, and placed them over the basket to hide the contents.

The Caul Bearer

The Bay Hotel was empty; there was no one behind the old oak wood bar. For a time she sat alone. The bad weather had either kept the rest of the flither girls down the coast or they had made their sodden way back to their homes. None of the locals were around. None had come down to the Wayfoot to see that their boats were still tied up. It was a while before the landlord came into the bar.

"Well Brid, there's not many out today. Do you want a drink to warm you up?"

"I haven't got any money, nothing for now."

Josh Brannislaw, a man of extraordinary height for a local and a widower of two winters, laid out two glasses and poured himself and Brid some brandy from a jug. Brid knew that it was from the fine cask, from one of the ones the excise men never found. The excise never found anything in Bay Town—there being too many secret hiding places. Brid made to get up from the fire.

"Stay there Brid, I'll bring the drink over. I've got some bread and cheese in the back too?" he enquired with a raised eyebrow.

"Thank you. That's most kind of you."

He was not long out of the bar and seemed in a hurry to bring back the food for Brid. As he placed the bread and cheese down on the table his hand moved as if to touch her arm, but he seemed to think twice of it. She looked at him with watery grey eyes and then past him to another table where Benjamin sat looking out to sea with a caul over his white face. If only I had given him the caul she thought.

Ben was wearing his old navy jumper, worn through years of use. Ben with his hair washed back by the sea with the caul stretched thin over his face, not the tiny dried thing that lay in the small box but this made of a harsher material, its edges now twisted into hooks that seemed to dig into Ben's skin, piercing it but with no show of blood. Brid had seen him in this state twice now as if mocking her because she hadn't given him the caul. She glanced at Josh to see if he had seen Ben. He hadn't.

Brid ate the bread and cheese slowly and sipped at the brandy.

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Josh methodically carried out his work behind the bar, spoke little and just raised his head from time to time as if expecting a customer to burst through the door at any minute.

The proximity of the fire did little to take the chill away and as Brid put up her hands to draw in the warmth, her eyes fell upon the covered box in the flither basket. Thanking Josh for his kindness she got up wearily, picked up the basket and left the inn.

Once at the cottage she placed the limpet basket outside the door. Later that afternoon her mother would take the bait out of their shells and bait the lines. Brid took the small casket and wrapped it deeper into her shawl and crept into the dwelling. The main room door was firmly shut against the cold weather so it was easy for Brid to climb the stairs, although one step creaked under her weight.

"Is that you Brid?" Brid greeted the call with silence.

"Brid, is that you?"

"I'm just going to change my wet clothes Mother. I've left the flithers outside."

"Fine Brid, so long as I know it's you." It seemed Brid wasn't the only member of the household that might be a little jittery at the moment.

At the threshold of her room, Brid hesitated. The flame of the candle flickered as she passed over. Once inside, candlelight caught the profile of an old woman, and then rendered her to the darkness. She saw the rest of them too, in the mirror, in the patterns of the old faded red curtains, on the grey bed throw, even in the pattern of water damage on the ceiling. The worn bed posts bore a resemblance to worm ridden, charnel house heads. Each night this phantasmagoria left their lair where they waited for her during the day and then they crept towards her at night and pressed their half formed entities closer to her so that she could hardly breathe, in that room, lest they followed the intake of her quickening breath. She had told no one about them and even though they were driving her into madness (if she was not entirely mad already) she would keep their secret. There was one

The Caul Bearer

face that terrified her more than the others, and that was the one in the wooden lid of the old sea chest in the corner. It looked like the face of a drowned sailor bloated by death and days in the sea, with no eyes: just gnarls were they should be. Whilst Brid lay frozen in horror the diabolical faces crept out of the shadows and hovered close by her pillow. An hour before dawn the last vestiges of mist swirled to nothing beneath her bed and patterns became fixed on the surface of things.

There was a dead baby in the casket. That is what she thought it was, bound in some foul green bandage. Its withered form could still be recognised and within the mouldy shawl it was wrapped in, were charms and black tokens made of jet for the older, half forgotten deities of the sea. Perhaps someone as grief stricken as her had cast it to the ocean years before. The sea, through countless storms, had cast it back up, long after the spell had been fulfilled and driven the offering into the soft cliff face. It wasn't the only baby in the row of small cottages that night because Brid could hear the first cries of the newborn not far away.

That infant gave a plaintiff mewling; a weak cry of alarm and Brid stared at the dead one in her arms. She snatched the charms from between the rotten bandages then put back the swaddled, mummified thing in the tiny casket and replaced the lid. Reaching above her head she put the small treasure with the other tokens, in the large fisher net, and dressed quickly. As she left the room she remembered to take one of her best woollen shawls from the bottom drawer. Brid hurried downstairs and lit an oil lantern with a taper from the dying fire.

The fisherman families rarely locked their front doors. There had never been any need, theft being such a rare occurrence. And Brid had no trouble entering the Eskell household. Once upstairs she could hear Tom's gentle snoring in the shadows and by the candlelight Jenna lay face away from her baby, with her arm around Tom. The baby opened its eyes and looked at Brid. Even a new born might cry at a stranger's touch but the infant didn't make a sound when Brid placed one hand under its neck,

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the other under the body, and lifted it gently out of the cradle. She made it down the dark stairs with the assurance of one who knew she was guided and slipped quietly over the threshold with the baby firmly bound in the green shawl. She clutched the child to her breast with one hand and picked up the heavy lantern with the other.

In an attempt to climb the pathway to the cliff top Brid only slipped once. The baby did not fall from her grasp but the stumble caused the infant to cry momentarily.

“It’s fine, little one. I won’t fall again.”

At the top of the hill she placed the baby on the damp grass with the lantern by its side, illuminating its puzzled face. Brid had never known its name for it bore none; it was too young and hadn’t been christened yet. She tried to remember if Tom had mentioned anything about naming, but all she could hear was the swell of the sea crashing into the cliff face below her and far off the scream of a woman in the night. Brid knelt down over the child and pushed the charms under the folds of the shawl. She bound it; swaddling the tiny form and trapping its arms tight to the body. The baby let out a small cry of surprise when Brid held it high above her head. She spun round three times, her long grey skirt swirling in the strange, green mist that crept across the cliff face and then she threw the baby to the sea, with the name of her fiancée on her lips.

As the villagers hurried up the pathway towards the light of the lantern, Brid took the track that trailed off in the other direction, down to the beach and then, she waded out into the sea. She felt something rough and icy make a grab for her thigh and then a cold hand on her leg that pulled her down.

Once summoned there is no denying the deities of the sea. They know that you will deliver yourself up to them, sooner or later. It is only a matter of time.

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