

## Weird Words: “The Harvest”

Written by Sheryl Baines

Wednesday, 02 March 2011 17:09

---

### FANGORIA

Our search for interesting, bizarre short fiction continues with this dark entry, a gripping little story called “The Harvest” by Sheryl Baines. Enjoy, dearest readers...

#### “The Harvest”

Lauren woke up too late. Too late to stem last night’s meal from surging the wrong way from her stomach back into her esophagus. Too late to stop the gut-wrenching spills of what-should-have-been-shit-by-now-but-wasn’t from gushing into her mouth, and too late to make it to the head so that she was violently sick in her bunk. After the first wave of vomit, she fell out of her bed to continue the stomach-turning spill onto her very limited floor space. Hot, sweet and vile, the stench crawled everywhere onto her body and bed. “Crap, I can still recognize it,” she said to herself, her tongue picking pieces of gore from between her teeth before her stomach clenched again. Try as she might to stop it, the next wave gushed out between her lips and splashed onto the floor.

By now, her head was a jackhammer hard at work, and she was kneeling in her intestinal filth and heaving. When she was finally able, Lauren sat back, her ass on her heels, drawing in quick, excruciating breaths, one hand on her thighs, the other hand on her bruised and aching stomach. “What was that all about?” She stood slowly and carefully, then sat on the edge of her bunk, trying not to sit in the puddle of puke on her blankets. The smell triggered her gag reflex, and her stomach tried to empty itself once again. But it was empty, leaving Lauren weak, with strings of saliva and tiny bits of synthetic taco—no meat of course—hanging from her lips.

But at least she felt better. Better out than in, as her mother would say. Lauren reached over to shut off the alarm before it had a chance to go off. The clock glowed 5:15 a.m. “Better get with it, I guess. We go underground in two hours.”

\*\*\*

## Weird Words: "The Harvest"

Written by Sheryl Baines

Wednesday, 02 March 2011 17:09

---

Jenny, Lauren's sister, wound her arms around her and held on tight. "Think of this hug whenever you need to, hon. Are you sure you don't want to take the blanket with you?" Lauren smiled, fondly remembering the rough yellow wool blanket they had used as a bedspread when they were kids. "I dearly wish I could, but there's just no room. Come on, change your mind, come with us. You know everyone else who's going, they'd love to have you along. Do you think Ted would miss you for a few days?"

Jenny grinned. "I'll miss you, but I know you're in good hands. Ted hasn't cooked for himself since college, and I don't even want to think about what the house would look like when I got back."

Lauren squeezed Jenny's hand tight. "I've really got to go, sis." The two women hugged again. "I'll call you when I get back." She waved goodbye from the taxi that would take her to rendezvous with the others.

\*\*\*

Lauren held her hand up to shield her eyes from the midday sun. She could barely make out the shape of the temporary biodome, standing as if it was a guardian between the folks of Earth and everything below. She could barely contain her excitement. It had taken months, but they had finally been granted permission to spelunk the caverns. In just a week or two, the site would be turned over to the science types as part of an ambitious program to source out alternate environments for food crops.

Lauren looked down at herself and smoothed the wrinkles out of her light jacket. "Remember burgers, little belly? And stir fries with real chicken?" All that had gone the way of the dodo with the implementation of the program. Once it went into effect, eating meat became an underground delicacy with serious penalties and ramifications. If you were caught eating an antelope steak, you had better be a cheetah. But humans have to eat, and even with the latest advances in technology, not enough farmland existed to produce anywhere near the amount required for healthy consumption. It quickly became obvious to world leaders that ramping up alliance space programs to search for planets capable of growing enough fruits, vegetables and grains to sustain life on Earth was far too expensive. So the Subterranean Biodome Project was developed to search for alternatives to growing food above ground.

## Weird Words: "The Harvest"

Written by Sheryl Baines

Wednesday, 02 March 2011 17:09

---

Not everyone was on board, of course. People were experiencing meat protein withdrawal and suffering not only the challenges to their physical systems, but the loss of the kind of joy and satisfaction that can only come from the effortless chew of a melt-in-your-mouth hunk of good grilled steak. For those folks, salad greens and hard-boiled eggs could only take you so far. It was fast approaching eat or be eaten. The preservationists were up in arms. There were certainly still some ugly times ahead.

"Ready, gang?" Lauren quickly glanced over the enthusiastic group in front of her, knowing that she would find agreement in every one of the five faces before her. "Andrea, lead the way. Then Steve, Felix, Sandy and Sean. I'll bring up the rear. Let's go!" The group grinned at each other. They had been planning this outing for months. With life being so hectic, each one of them had made personal scheduling sacrifices to make this trip. Lauren couldn't remember the last time they had all been together like this. Seminary college seemed so long ago.

\*\*\*

"Hold up, Sean, I need a break." Companionable murmurs were followed by heavy thunks of backpacks hitting the ground. Lauren glanced at her watch. They had been below about two hours. Someone stretched and cracked what sounded like an ankle joint while another answered in kind. Everyone laughed. Sounds of water bottles being opened and wrappers removed from protein bars broke up the stillness. Steve raised his hand and turned up the brightness on his helmet light. "Sssssh." They stood as still as possible and listened. "Bats?"

They waited a minute longer, then gradually relaxed. But the noise had left a lingering presence that made their skin crawl. But that was only moments, seconds ago, wasn't it?

JUMP! Lauren lifted a forkful of food to her mouth and choked, suddenly in the kitchen of her own compartment topside before she was immediately whipped back to the dank darkness deep inside the Earth. Fear spawned in every cell, accompanied by a wild surge of adrenaline that left her weak and agitated at the same time. She fought the urge to drop to her knees and summoned the will of her training to remain standing. "Andrea?" she yelled. "Sean? Steve?"

## Weird Words: "The Harvest"

Written by Sheryl Baines

Wednesday, 02 March 2011 17:09

---

Lauren's heart raced, and she tried desperately not to overreact. "OK, you guys. Cut it out."

Nothing. "*Felix! Sandy!*" Her voice was getting raw and her jaws were aching with the kind of tension that threatened to bloom into panic. She closed her eyes, panting, and knew she was close to fainting with fear.

JUMP! In the blink of a synapse she was staring into the eyes of a nightmare. A wild howl filled her ears, but even as she acknowledged it, she knew that the howling was hers and that no one else could hear it. She couldn't bring herself to fathom just what she was seeing, but at the same time she knew she wouldn't be able to block it much longer.

JUMP! The yellow wool blanket that usually rested at the foot of her sister's bed back home in Wyoming was now wound affectionately around her shoulders. As she reached out with her fingers to tenderly touch the gentle face above her own, she detected a deep emotional wrench from her...

JUMP! Lauren succumbed to the moment in her own intense pain and shock, unable now to take her eyes from the creature in front of her, violating her very essence and draining her will. There were words floating in the air all around her, strong and distinct, then wavering and gone. Lauren shivered, knowing that she could not, must not, give in to whatever this illusion was. She dug deep within herself, searching for strength born of faith and training, the kind that had carried her through the dark and seemingly hopeless times. Instead, she found very little of herself, and what she did find was cowering in the corner, pitifully unrecognizable. And she had the undeniable feeling that this was real.

JUMP! Lauren coughed violently as her lungs fought to expel the revolting, malodorous soot that threatened to extinguish her ability to breathe. Through her tear-filled eyes, she could see that the mud and stone of her surroundings were slick with a bright, glistening fluid. Words continued to hover just within her line of vision. She strained her eyes to distinguish what they said, a minute exercise in self-preservation, an exercise of choice. But the words, although she could read them, meant distressingly little to her. They must have at one time. A bright light went on in Lauren's head. The words didn't make any sense at first because they were backwards. She was seeing them in reflection. Patience, Confidence, Bravery, Leadership, Courage, Family. Lauren felt the spiders and beetles of fear crawling all over her body. She understood on some level that the insects may or may not be real, but it didn't matter. The effect was the same.

## Weird Words: “The Harvest”

Written by Sheryl Baines

Wednesday, 02 March 2011 17:09

---

Instinctively, Lauren was quite sure the aberration in front of her didn't know that she could see the image of a second creature behind her in the reflective material. She screeched anew, her mind revolted, trying to run as far away as possible from the reality of what she was seeing: husks. Many husks, hanging as if to dry on makeshift hooks on the stone wall behind her. Next to the husks was a disturbing pile of white and grey debris—bone debris.

Lauren's eyes flashed back to the husks to fixate on a piece of thin, pale blue material caught in the folds, not unlike the jackets worn by herself and her friends on expeditions such as this one. Another flash to a multicolored bit of material hanging from a long length of dried skin. Her nearly comatose mind told her that it was probably material from a much earlier exploration, possibly one of the first teams to investigate this area for subterranean farming possibilities. But then came the seismic activity that prompted further investigation. Did that mean these creatures had been harvesting humans for decades, even centuries? How could we not know? What went wrong?

But she knew what went wrong. She was looking at collateral damage, acceptable risk, expected rates of failure, whatever you want to call it. No one cared, so one looked. In the face of mounting hungers and tensions topside, the proper stories were fed to the right people until everyone was satisfied, everyone was sated and there were No. Further. Questions.

The creature behind Lauren held up a corrugated metal tube that looked like a dentist's drill. Lauren's mind officially left the building, but a small part of her had no choice but to acknowledge the devastating possibilities. Couldn't be helped. What has perfect sight but is still blind? Ask anyone who has witnessed a catastrophic event; they didn't want to see, but they couldn't help themselves. Some call it morbid curiosity. And that's exactly what the final fragment of Lauren's burnt-out mind was experiencing right now. It was like watching late-night television, where you feel like you're being hypnotized into watching. An innate sense of logic was struggling to make itself known, a logic that would tie it all together and force it to make sense. Too bad. If only.

The last struggling nugget of Lauren's being was brave and moral, with legs. It scurried around the deep, depressed hollow of her consciousness, looking for the rest of itself. How could it leave without saying goodbye? And how dare they adopt our technology to use against us?

## Weird Words: "The Harvest"

Written by Sheryl Baines

Wednesday, 02 March 2011 17:09

---

The frightening form in front of her came close, too close. She tried to raise her arms to ward it away. She recognized a length of hose that looked suspiciously like the one from a vacuum cleaner...it suddenly made sense. Horrible, mind-blowing, get-me-outta-here kind of sense. The creature, willfully oblivious to any thought patterns emanating from the host—although it might have suspected that part was over—attached the drill to the hose, and prepared to insert the grinder into the base of Lauren's spine. The flange would follow closely behind, scraping, catching and pushing all of the delicious bits forward and upward to the mouth. Lauren's jaws would sufficiently chew down her body's tasty bits to be gently sucked out by the creature attached to her by the feeding trunk. Her arms twitched with muscle memory that was no longer capable. She managed to twist to the right, and then to the left, in a desperate move to confirm to her eyes what her body already knew and had accepted. She forced herself to look down at her legs and blinked.

JUMP! "Stop, Lauren. Hold still, please, dear, so I can clean you up. Look at me, dearest. It's only a scrape, I promise you. Mommy will fix you up and Dad will have you back on your bike in no time." Then reality yanked her back to the very place her mind desperately wanted to leave. The creature's face twitched. The long, grey, trunklike appendage stood out from under its eyes. Lauren screamed and clenched her teeth. The feeding trunk flexed, and with lightning speed attached itself to Lauren's mouth.

A great sensation of stretching skin, then sharp pain as the already raw edges of her mouth ripped further open to accommodate the immense tube. Intense pain enveloped her body as her back was ripped open and the shock of cold brutal steel entered her body. A millisecond later, her jaws began to work of their own accord, and through the pain and violation, she could feel what felt like a small drill, chewing through soft tissue and organs, whipping this way and that, not missing a clump or clot. The words that had surrounded her were no longer in the air, but Lauren couldn't see them anyway. Her eyes were clamped shut against the desperate nature of her situation. She gave in to the memory of her sister's hug and let herself go. Her remaining body systems were simplified; it only had to continue to chew itself for ease of nutrient delivery to the horror she fed, not unlike mama birds who chew worms before depositing them into the demanding open beaks of their offspring.

A single voice intruded into Lauren's vacant head, a matter-of-fact voice that entered into the empty space without permission or preamble. "It's all right, Lauren. Relax. We know by the streaming memories of your friends and yourself that this process is unpleasant. But also please know we are a compassionate race, not so unlike yourselves. Our processes are flawed. Your responses to our memory-diversion techniques are recorded and will be analyzed. Rest assured that future hosts will not endure what we hope are minor discomforts experienced by your race during the feeding transfer."

## Weird Words: “The Harvest”

Written by Sheryl Baines

Wednesday, 02 March 2011 17:09

---

But it might have been talking to the wind.

*Sheryl Baines is a movie buff and part-time writer living in Ontario, Canada.*

{comments on}