

WINNER OF THE  
2017 MANUSCRIPTS  
PROSE CONTEST  
WITH  
KELSEY PARKER ERVICK

KATE EMMERT

# Throwing Dirt



*Prose Contest Winner*

I stood on the wooden platform, one hand looped through the noose, the other pulling up my torn dress.

“Don’t pull on the noose too hard,” Jussi said, “It might fall down.”

Jussi became my first friend after I attended horseback riding lessons at her house, three miles down the road from mine. We’d lived close since the age of four. Our friendship was closer. Still with brown, corkscrew curls and a wide-toothed grin, she stood on the muddy path below me circling a stick through the pebbles, straw, and dirt. Trees encircled us in the woods, but the foliage wasn’t thick. I looked through the web of birches and cedars and saw a vampire climbing into her tree harness. Farther to my right was a ski-masked man revving up his chainsaw while a tech guy sat on a mud splattered four-wheeler with a KD Entertainment Haunted

Hayride and Barn sweatshirt on.

“Everyone’s at their stations,” he said into a walkie-talkie. It was officially haunting season for Jussi and her family, the Kent-Doolans, who had turned their horse farm into a horrifying scare-zone during the month of October. We were in the middle of Boone County, surrounded by newly harvested Indiana sweet corn fields. Corn tassels and forgotten husks littered the field, but I could still smell the distinct candy sweetness of the corn mingled with tangy cow manure as Jussi climbed onto my platform, hiking up her pea green peasant skirt.

“You hold onto it with your hands, and it’ll look like you’re hanging,” Jussi instructed me. At thirteen years old, she was an expert in scare tactics and fake blood application. She sat down on the stage we’d be sharing: a flat, wooden platform built into the slight hill behind us. There was one post in the middle of it, on which a fake noose was strung.

“I’m glad I don’t have to be the witch,” Gabby said, walking back with Jordanna from the Port-o-Potty. Gabby’s skirt trailed in the leaves and dust, and Jordanna was scratching her nose delicately to avoid smearing her “villager” makeup—dirt blotches across her cheeks and nose. Gabby still had her glasses on, though she’d take them off during the scaring.

“What if I accidentally swing off the platform?” She said, pulling an invisible noose up with her hand as she tilted her neck sideways. This haunted woods stuff was not Gabby’s thing. She favored fashionable outfits and movie nights to staying out in the woods for hours.

“That’d be a headline for sure,” Jordanna said. “Please don’t die.”

I’d been best friends with Gabby and Jordanna since elementary school and Jussi since preschool. Though we were only a month into seventh grade at Western Boone Jr.Sr High School, the school cornered by cornfields and cow pastures, our years together proved that entering junior high wouldn’t take a toll on our union. We’d survived crushing on

the same boys, Mrs. McCoskey's fifth grade math class, and wearing Crocs.

"You're just jealous," I said, making a grotesque face at her. "The witch is the main person."

We were spending Jussi's thirteenth birthday in an unusual manner for celebrating teenhood: running the witch-hanging scene in the haunted woods hayride. Jussi, Gabby, and Jordanna would be playing the irate villagers, and I would be pleading for mercy as the accused witch. We were only one of ten scenes out in the woods.

"Besides, it's not an actual noose," I said, tugging at the false knot.

I could look through the thicket of trees to see the large repainted black "haunted" barn next to Jussi's house. A few horses and a miniature pony grazed in the pasture behind the barn where the combine sat in position, ready to chase the hay wagon during the ride. I had never worked at the Haunted Hayride and Barn before; I would be crossing over from sitting in the hay wagon corner every year to being the frightening character screaming at the hayride participants. It gave me an excuse not to go through the haunted barn, the scarier half of KD Stables Haunted Hayride and Barn. I thought the woods would be tamer since the hayride was mainly meant to be family-friendly.

"Yeah, but I don't want to scream all night. No thanks," Gabby said. She walked over to the stage Jordanna and her would be using: the face of a village shack, with only a front porch, door and porch roof attached. The shack stood across from Jussi and I's platform. Three unlit Tiki Torches were leaning on one of the wooden posts holding up the roof of the shack.

"Will we be using these?" She asked.

"Heck yeah!" Jussi said, raising her eyebrows wickedly. Gabby rolled her eyes, her usual response to Jussi's irrational antics. I sometimes wondered what growing up on a fear farm did to Jussi's imagination. She loved the creepy and

the ghoulish, but to what extent? I hated scary movies, but now I was play-acting one. I hopped off my creaky stage and grabbed the bag of Doritos from the snack shack up the path. I could smell fake spicy cheese and the damp leaves from the darkening evening: a wet processed salad. My fingers were tingling from the crisp air, and the sun was melting into the ground. The haunting would start soon.

“I can’t believe we agreed to do this for your birthday,” Jordanna said. I could sense she was thinking about who would be watching us—our immature classmates, trashy townies, Girl Scout troops, probably one of her newly developed crushes. She kept smoothing out the dirt on her face.

“Yep, we’re weirdos,” I said. We were the goody-two-shoes of our grade, me being an especially brown-nosing student, but we loved playing pretend and making silly videos.

“I’m pretty sure we knew that already,” Jussi said, laughing.

“Do you think people will be scared?” Gabby asked.

“It’s a witch hanging scene. Why wouldn’t they be?” Jussi said.

“We’re 13 year old girls,” I said, gesturing to my flat, five foot self.

“Just act extra crazy then,” Jussi replied. She thrived in the woods, the darkness. I felt like burying myself in the pile of dried leaves next to the rusty truck for the hillbilly scene. This was different than us acting out *High School Musical* in my bedroom.

A whirring growl of a motor pumped into my ears as a four-wheeler came around the corner and halted by our scene. Sabrina, Jussi’s mom and director of the entire haunted affair, let off the gas.

“Do you girlies know what you’re supposed to do?” She said, swinging her leg over the seat and stepping onto the ground littered with sticks from the storm the previous night. She wore a faded KD Stables shirt, the sleeves torn off to show her muscular arms clearly formed from building stages and

cleaning stables.

“Mom, we got this,” Jussi said. Sabrina walked over to the stack of logs next to the villager lean-to with a bottle of lighter fluid.

“This outta keep you ladies warm,” She said, dousing the dark umber colored kindling. Gas and alcohol emanated off the pile as the timber cackled happily as it caught fire.

“Should we get these, Sabrina?” Gabby asked picking up one of the Tiki Torches. With a nod, Sabrina walked over and lit the tips of all three, handing them off to Jussi, Gabby, and Jordanna, raising her eyebrows as a warning to us, before jumping back on the four-wheeler.

“It’s almost seven, so don’t leave your scene zone from here on out,” Sabrina said pointing at the black spray painted X’s on a giant oak to my left and another on my right marking the witch-hanging zone. Whisps of smoke snaked through the air, staining the Indiana sky, streaks of gray meeting the hazy purple of autumn sunsets.

Even with extra sweatshirt layers under my black witch dress and wig, a chill was creeping into my bones and thoughts. We’d been practicing the scene earlier that day, but in the darkening night, the noose was suddenly looking tighter, the trees swaying as if enchanted, and smoke hazed the empty cornfields. I knew the scenes were all simulated; the horror characters were students from our small high school. Around the bend in the woods I saw one the Key Club President with a gorilla suit on, his partner dressed up as the blonde from *King Kong*, standing up on a platform like mine. Yet I couldn’t dismiss the creeping feeling of a spider crawling up my spine or the replaying images of horror movies set in woods.

The *Ghostbusters* theme song came reeling from a mile away; the hayride was starting. My stomach nervously jumped as I climbed up and stood in position, holding onto the noose, practicing little screeches I’d magnify into screams when the real hayriders came past us. I knew my voice would be gone by the end of the night. My choir teacher’s face came into

my mind as I imagined singing in class on Monday. At least Jordanna and Gabby would also be hoarsely singing with me.

“Jussi, get over here! They’re coming soon,” Jordanna said, panicking as Jussi danced around the bonfire, adding more branches and any type of stick or combustible object lying nearby. Gabby was holding both their Tiki-Torches, stomping them on the shack floor, practicing her villager role. I heard the clamor of feet and jumbled shouts as all the actors ran back to their scenes, getting into place, hopping onto platforms, laying in caskets, and climbing into flying harnesses. The *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* scene was first; the Jason-actor revved his chainsaw, missing its blade of course, and hid behind a false door.

“Will you relax? I do this all the time,” Jussi replied as the flames grew wilder and wilder. The trees towered over me like giant shadow monsters, leaves swirled and scattered together as if someone was slowly walking through them. I thought about coyotes and raccoons and my stomach clenched with each crunch I heard or sudden movement I imagined seeing in the trees. In the distance, I heard the jarring bray of the Headless Horseman’s horse as it rode alongside the tractor-pulled-wagon filled with eager people.

“Well, we’re dead,” Jordanna said, laughing at Jussi’s pyro habits. The fire was eating up the dry leaves and sticks that Jussi was feeding it like a wolf to its ravenous cubs. I watched the wagon enter the far side of the woods, blaring *Thriller*. We were the second to last scene, so I had time to get Jussi back in order.

“Jussi, I’ve been friends with you for eight years, but if you don’t stop dancing around the fire...” I joked, cracking my knuckles, more out of nervousness than pretend intimidation. I’d been friends with her long before I had developed the bad habit my mother and sister, Abby, so detested. I always tried to exercise this addiction when they weren’t around so I didn’t have to hear Abby’s nagging reminder that I was still immature and lacked self-control though she was only two

years older. Thankfully, Jussi also partook in this habit, so I usually ignored these warnings of arthritis.

“Relax! I’ve done this a hundred times,” Jussi said. She continued standing by the bonfire until the wagon was at the *King Kong* scene before us. I was about to yell at her again, but she clearly knew the drill and hopped onto our platform just as the wagon turned the bend.

As the tractor trundled over rocks and mud, I opened my mouth and hesitated, taking in the scattered couples, elementary school girls with their parents, and tough looking guys coming towards me. My stomach tightened. Jussi looked like she could’ve been sitting on the couch watching TV. The trees were shaking, shaking, and whispering their disappointment with me. The grinding of the tractor engine vibrated my feet, jacking up my adrenaline. I closed my eyes and wet my lips before ripping out a scream, pleading with the villagers for mercy. I smelled the straw cushioning the wagon, and hints of tractor diesel distracted me from the crowd. The noose rope was scratching my hand, but I kept reaching the other hand out towards our audience, asking them to save me.

“Please, please, I’m innocent. Don’t let them hang me!” I screeched, clawing in the air trying to get a reaction from the group of tough guys sitting in the back, arms lounged over the sides. I saw their smirks and despised them immediately. Gabby and Jordanna chanted at me from across the path, on the villager shack, torches thumping in time with their accusations. With their movements, it was hard to tell the porch was the only real part of the shack. The rest of the lean-to was open woods, tree stumps, and poison ivy.

“Kill the witch.”

“Watch her hang.”

“Kill, kill, kill.”

Jussi stood next to me, holding onto my shoulder: my executioner.

“You’ll hang!” She shouted among other blasphemous

statements. A cultlike ambiance swirled around us, with the fire burning and acrid smells peeling off the fungus attached to the burning logs. The yelling attacked my ears, and the pounding beat in time with my pulse.

*Die.thump.Witch.thump. Hang, hang, hang.*

The last *hang* lingered in the air before settling into the dust, patterned by the wagon's wheels. We paused, catching our breaths after the laughter from the raucous high school students passed. I rubbed my raw hand, now itchy and scratched from the rope. Despite the noose's burn, I was hooked, addicted to the pulse of excitement when the audience was passing through our scene. My throat cried in protest, but my body thrived. I was less of a witch, and more of an animal: an untamed woodland creature.

"We are wild," Jussi said, howling at the stars, after the smell of diesel faded away to the next scene. I laughed, wanting this statement to be true.

"We totally scared that group," Jordanna said. With the wagon gone, my heart slowed its pace, my body shrinking back into a curly-headed thirteen-year-old in a tattered black prom dress from the 90's. Of course, we delighted in the idea of being wild, but really these hours of dress-up were the sole existence of our radical moments. I was still afraid of leaving our zone, afraid to venture behind my platform into shadowy bushes and groaning trees, walking into the possibility of poison ivy and ticks. We were no more than four teenagers playing pretend-rebels, reveling in our contained recklessness.



By 10pm, with two more hours left, the high from screaming was fading. One wagon had broken down and backed up the other hayrides, allowing the four of us to sit on the creaking shack porch and act out humorous scenarios, as we loved to do.

"Now we're learning archery today," Gabby said, exaggerating our P.E. teacher's goofy movements when

holding a bow and arrow.

“She’s so strange,” I said, thinking of our teacher’s favoritism to certain strange kids in our class. Apparently being strange meant “not showing us favoritism” in our teen language. We took our academics seriously, just not P.E. I hated how sore my hands were from archery, especially when I had swim practice to follow in the evenings. Currently, my hands were filthy and my throat was sandpaper. I sneezed and black dust came onto my already soiled hands.

“Ugh, I’m going to be sneezing black snot forever,” I said.

“Ew, thanks for sharing,” Jordanna said, kicking the black dust up with her boots. It puffed into the air and settled back, as if untouched. She was probably practicing choreography from her dance rehearsal. I liked to think of myself as coordinated, but I still couldn’t seem to get the boys like Jordanna could. I knew she’d have boys lining up to ask her to our school dance.

“Think the wagon’s almost fixed?” Gabby asked, being a tribal warrior with her lit torch.

“Probably not much longer. Dad’s working on it,” Jussi said. Crickets were singing tonight, as were bullfrogs from the nearby creek. I felt like a whittled puppet, arms and legs limp after straining my body, leaning out while holding onto the noose. Wooden hands and feet, swung gently back and forth as I watched Gabby and Jussi dance around the villager porch with their Tiki Torches. We were part of the same tribe now, haunters forever. I was standing on the ground looking up at them on the porch; they were reenacting what looked like Nemo’s dentist tank initiation scene in *Finding Nemo*. The torch poles were stomping faster, enthusiastically. Gabby lifted her torch higher, and we were play-chanting and pretending to be angry villagers waiting for the next wagon. Waiting for—

“Fire!” Jordanna said as Gabby took a step back from the sputter of flames starting above her. The burlap cover hanging

around the edge of the shack's light bulb had caught fire from Gabby's Tiki Torch lifted too high.

"It's on fire, guys, fire!" Gabby said rapidly, her eyes growing wider. In those seconds of chanting, enacting some type of cult scene with the smell of smoke already clinging to us from the bonfire, we hadn't registered the additional smoke until a few seconds after the burlap cloth was on fire. Tiny pieces of burlap dropped onto the shack's creaky floor.

"Get off! This is wood, the shack," I said, hands tingling again, no longer from the cold. I envisioned the rustic beams quickly catching fire, the flammable fake villager shack collapsing into ash. I shook the image from my mind and tried to focus on what was actually real. There was still time; the shack remained untouched by the small flames. I didn't think the entire woods were in danger, as the evening dew had started covering the leaves and grass. But the shack was in jeopardy.

"Stop, stop it," Jordanna said, jumping off the edge of the shack onto the ground. She landed close to an oak, illuminated by the other bonfire flames grabbing towards its branches. At least that fire was contained—stones encircling its bottom logs.

"That's what we're trying..." Gabby said. We weren't really making sense; we just knew it had to be stopped, somehow. Jordanna grabbed Gabby's Tiki Torch and her own, leaning them against my platform, where the noose hung, across the path. At least my wooden stage was far enough across from the flames to even get close to catching fire. Jussi ran down the trail towards the *King Kong* scene, as I scooped up dirt from the wagon path and flung it at the singeing cloth; the flames were spreading slowly, lingering on the burlap.

"We need more," Gabby shouted.

"Grab some of it," I said, gesturing to the ground. But even with all our pitiful tosses of dirt, the flames were indifferent. I spotted an old rotting stump next to the bonfire and noticed

the thick muddy mush of dirt and tree rot combined.

“Here, this!” I yelled over my shoulder. One, two, three, four seconds, I was grabbing the mud. Five, six, seven, eight, nine seconds, I was on the porch flinging the sludge at the blur of orange. Gabby and Jordanna were force-feeding the flames with muck, but it wasn’t good enough. The ceiling started blackening. It smelled like toothpicks and earth and straw, but it was wrong. Sourness stung my nostrils and dirt on my forehead was running into my eyes, burning. It had only been mere minutes since we were play-acting.

“Over here!” Jussi shouted, but she wasn’t talking to us. The choir guys from the next scene over, dressed in demented redneck costumes, were running towards us with Jussi. I recognized Frank, Patrick, and Jordan—our Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Wizard in the production of *Wizard of Oz* at school. Patrick was everyone’s crush: the charming and talented senior that I adored as a munchkin in the musical. The four of us went and stood by the trees, while they took over our failed mission. My back pressed against the bark, but I dared not move. The boys jumped onto the porch and Frank pulled down the burlap onto the porch floor and forcefully stomped it with his cowboy boot. He kept stomping until the flames died out, and I heard a hard crack. Frank had stamped through the molding floor beams, leaving a jagged hole at the back edge of our stage. Finished.

“Are you guys alright?” Frank asked hopping off the porch. Patrick and Jordan were back standing in the shadows, looking unruffled.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Jussi said.

“Thank you,” Gabby said. Her chest was inhaling quickly.

“Well if you’re good, we’d better...” Frank nodded his head towards their scene, his black hair peeking out from under his cowboy hat. The other boys were already in the middle of the path, moving their feet like bored horses.

“Yeah,” I said. My mind was blanking on words.

We were all nodding, trying to show our gratefulness but becoming aware that we were four junior high girls holding Tiki Torches and covered in mud and these guys were upperclassmen who we'd never really talked to before.

They seemed to melt into the tall oaks and cedars, and then we were all alone. Had it been five minutes, twenty, an hour? My lungs ached and my hands felt caked in cement. The wind was blowing my wig, tilted sideways now. The bangs tickled my cheek. I hopped onto the porch and walked over to inspect the damage, as did Jussi. The floor beams remained rickety, but stable. We would have to be careful with the cracked hole in the right corner floor. Jussi picked up the ruined black mass of once-burlap cloth caught on the jagged edges of the hole. With her gloved hands, she threw it into the bonfire.

"It's my fault," Gabby said, walking over to the porch. She was wiping away tears, streaking her grimy cheeks. Jordanna leaned against her, still in shock, but rubbing Gabby's back.

"No, no it isn't," Jordanna said.

"We were all playing around," I said. The cold of the night was creeping back into me, bullying the warmth from the fire and adrenaline out of its way.

"The wagon must be fixed; it's on the bridge now," Jordanna said, watching the John Deere tractor come closer. The wind was agitated now, causing the leaves to roll down the path. Dirt kept spitting in my face. Always the worrier, I knew we had to get ourselves back up on the platform and shack and ready for the incoming hayride.

"We should probably..."

"What if the entire shack had caught on fire? Or we'd gotten burned?" Gabby said cutting over my paranoid warning. I heard the crescendo of *Thriller* creeping up again but tried ignoring its tune. Jordanna heard it too. We looked at one another and she pursed her lips.

"Gabs, don't worry about it, honestly," Jussi said. Though she had a loving heart, Jussi didn't like to linger on

emotions. She wanted a quick and easy fix without tears or hugging. But Gabby looked far from consolation. I knew, if we let her, that she would mope for awhile, unless we could cheer her up temporarily.

“Yeah, we’ll worry about it later. We need to get ready,” Jordanna said.

“Your parents are going to hate me,” Gabbys said, looking down at her boots. I doubted the Kent-Doolans would care that much, but I also wanted to be trusted to work here again. The wagon was at the cemetery scene now; skeletons were dancing through painted graves while a red, stereotypical devil popped out from behind a large tree. Only two more scenes until the wagon reached our pitiful party.

“They won’t find out,” Jussi said, shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly. I knew Gabby would hate that answer, but I also wanted her to swallow it so we could get into our places. I shuffled backwards, closer to my platform.

“None of us will tell, Gabby,” I said. The rest of us nodded. Gabby stood up onto the porch and looked at the cracked corner. I could see the damp grass, clear from leaves through the hole.

“Just stay away from the edge,” Jordanna said. Gabby let out a small chuckle, quiet, but genuine. She still looked distraught, but the wagon was coming.

“Yeah, we don’t want anyone actually dying tonight,” I said, as we all broke into relieved laughter. Gabby looked temporarily persuaded, which was all we needed. We could talk it over later in Jussi’s room or at least at lunch on Monday. I was back on my platform, holding onto the fraying noose, Jussi next to me, holding onto her Tiki Torch, somehow still lit.

“Seriously?” I said nodding at her ignited weapon, fully aware of its danger now. She simply grinned at me and looked at the approaching wagon. I shook my head. Unbelievable and yet unsurprising. I wanted to ask her if she thought anyone would notice the hole, but stopped myself. We’d been secret-

keepers for less than ten minutes, and I was already trying to be careful. I knew nothing of maintaining serious secrets. Maybe it would add to our entertainment, another scene for us to reenact at sleepovers. I shivered.

“Ready?” I said, more to myself than anyone. Gabby raised her eyebrows at me across the path, timidly holding her unlit torch. She was making an effort not to lift it off the floor.

“We got this,” Jordanna said, smoothing her ponytail. Our bonfire had dwindled down since Jussi’s additional branches. I was tired of smelling like smoke and burnt leaves. The tractor pulled around the trees, entering our scene zone, clear of any flames.

“Happy birthday Juss,” I said, keeping my eyes on the faces approaching. It was a full wagon, but I didn’t care if it held the cool kids or creepy men anymore. I was a rebel in my own right. They were insignificant. I swayed my body with the noose, with the trees swinging over me, and let their hanging branches catch my screams as they tore out of me.