Among The Letters

FEATURED ARTICLE · HALLOWEEN 2026

Lantern Light and Low Voices

On the old pleasure of a story told to frighten, and why we still gather for it every October

Presented by *Among The Letters*

The Last Night of October

Late on the last night of October, the doorbell finally goes quiet. The bowl by the door holds a few lonely candies, the porch pumpkin has burned down to a soft orange glow, and the street outside is scattered with the cheerful wreckage of the evening, a dropped cape here, a crumpled wrapper there. The small witches and astronauts have gone home. In that hush, with the house settling around you, a certain kind of story begins to feel very close.

Halloween is a strange and generous holiday. It asks children to knock on the doors of neighbours they barely know, and it asks grown adults to hang paper bats in the window without embarrassment. Underneath the costumes and the candy, though, it is a night built for telling tales. It always has been. For as long as autumn has brought the harvest in and the dark down early, people have marked its turning by gathering close and frightening one another on purpose.

A FREE READ FOR THIS SECTION

“Halloween”

by Robert Burns · 1785

Burns follows a crowd of Ayrshire country folk through their Halloween charms and fortune games, from pulling kail stalks to sowing hemp seed by moonlight. The night ends, fittingly, around the hearth with “unco tales” and merry jokes, proof that this evening has always belonged to storytellers.

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A Fear We Choose

There is something wonderfully odd about that. Most of the year we work hard to avoid being afraid. We lock doors, check forecasts and read the fine print. Then October arrives and we go looking for dread the way we might look for a warm coat. We turn down the lights. We pick the book with the cracked black spine. We read the next page even though we suspect, quite rightly, that something terrible is waiting on it.

The secret is that a frightening story is a fear we get to hold in our own hands. We can close the cover whenever we like. We can put the kettle on and come back. The monster on the page is real enough to quicken the pulse, yet it cannot follow us into the kitchen, and that small margin of safety turns terror into pleasure. A good scary story lets us practise courage in a room where nothing can actually hurt us.

A FREE READ FOR THIS SECTION

“On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror”

by Anna Laetitia Aikin and John Aikin · 1773

More than two and a half centuries ago, this sister and brother puzzled over the very paradox of this section, why we hurry toward the stories that frighten us. Their short essay closes with “Sir Bertrand,” a Gothic fragment written so you can test the theory on your own pulse.

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What the Old Tales Knew

The oldest ghost stories were rarely about blood. They were about a knock at the wrong hour, a light in a window that should have been empty, a familiar voice calling from somewhere it could not possibly be. They understood that the most frightening thing is not the creature itself but the moment just before we see it. A creak on the stair does more work than any fang.

“A creak on the stair does more work than any fang.”

Those tales were also, very often, about the people telling them. A story passed around a kitchen table on a cold night carried warnings about the bog road and the deep lake, about strangers and bargains and promises broken. Beneath the shivers sat a quiet kind of wisdom, the gathered caution of a whole village, handed down in a form that children would beg to hear again.

A FREE READ FOR THIS SECTION

“Poisoned”

by Lisa Dotzauer · 2026

Narrated by an apple that remembers a famous fairy tale from the inside, this prize-winning haunting of under 400 words traces how a story shifts as mothers pass it to their children by firelight. It is a clever, quietly chilling reminder that the old tales kept a deeper truth tucked inside the shiver.

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The Art of the Slow Reveal

Anyone who has tried to write a frightening story knows how delicate the work is. Say too much and the spell breaks. Say too little and the reader shrugs. The best eerie writing lives in the space between, where a detail is described just a little too carefully. A door that was closed is now open an inch. The dog will not go into the back bedroom. The photograph on the mantel seems to have changed, though no one can say exactly how.

That restraint is a gift to the reader, because it hands over the final brushstroke. We supply the face at the window. We imagine the shape in the corner, and our imaginations are always more unsettling than anything an author could spell out. In that sense every scary story is a collaboration, finished in the dark by the person holding the book.

A FREE READ FOR THIS SECTION

“Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad”

by M. R. James · 1904

A sceptical professor on a seaside holiday finds an old bronze whistle and blows it, just once. James was the master of the detail described a little too carefully, and the empty second bed in this story may be the most unsettling piece of furniture in English fiction.

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Gathering Close

Perhaps that is why Halloween reading feels so shared, even when we do it alone. Reading a ghost story on the last night of October connects us to every other reader doing the same, to grandparents who heard such tales by lamplight and to children who will hear them long after us. The words may be new or old or somewhere in between, but the ritual is ancient. Gather close. Lower your voice. Listen.

If you share a home with others, try reading one aloud this year. Choose something short, a single tale that fits between the last trick-or-treater and bedtime. Dim the lights. Let your voice drop at the right moments and pause wherever the page seems to hold its breath. You may be surprised how quickly the room goes still, and how even the most sceptical listener glances, just once, toward the hallway.

A FREE READ FOR THIS SECTION

“The Golden Boars”

by Mata Haggis-Burridge · 2026

A poor seamstress and her woodcutter husband shelter a stranger from a storm and are rewarded with a marvellous gift that comes with one simple rule. Told in the cadence of a classic fairy tale, it takes about ten minutes to read aloud and lands its ending with a lovely, wicked chill.

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Kindness in the Dark

For all its shadows, the best Halloween writing is not cruel. Many of the most beloved eerie tales have tenderness at their centre. A lonely ghost wants only to be remembered. A haunted house turns out to be grieving. A creature everyone fears is the most frightened of all. These stories remind us that what lurks in the dark is often simply something unseen, and that being unseen is its own kind of sorrow.

That may be the holiday's deepest lesson. We put on masks for a night and become, briefly, someone else. We open our doors to strangers and hand them something sweet. We tell stories about the dead and, in doing so, remember them. Beneath the plastic skeletons and the flickering jack-o'-lanterns lies a very human wish, to look straight at what frightens us and find, at the end, a little warmth.

A FREE READ FOR THIS SECTION

“The Canterville Ghost”

by Oscar Wilde · 1887

An American family moves into a haunted English manor and cheerfully refuses to be frightened by its centuries-old ghost. Beneath the comedy lies one of the tenderest endings in ghost fiction, as a young girl’s compassion finally lets a weary spirit rest.

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One Candle Left

So when the doorbell has gone quiet this year and the last candle is guttering in its pumpkin, give yourself one more small treat. Find a story with a chill in it. Settle into the chair nearest the lamp. Read slowly, and listen to the house around you, the tick of the radiator, the wind pressing at the glass, the floorboard that always creaks for no reason at all.

Then, when you reach the final line, sit for a moment in the dark you have earned. Notice how the shadows in the room look a little deeper than before, and how glad you are of the light. That gladness is what the old storytellers were giving us all along. Happy Halloween, dear reader. Leave the porch light on.

A FREE READ FOR THIS SECTION

“The Old Nurse’s Story”

by Elizabeth Gaskell · 1852

An old nurse tells the children in her care about the winter she spent in a lonely Northumberland manor, where a phantom child came knocking at the windows through the snow. Gaskell wrote it for a Christmas fireside, yet it belongs just as well to a late October night with the lamp turned low.

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With lantern-lit wishes from *Among The Letters*

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