

# Dancing With the Monster

*by* Deborah Oster Pannell

It comes to me at night, the monster. I don't even realize it's in the room until I hear it breathing behind me. It reaches out its hands and places them on my shoulders. Its fingers are furry and soft, but strong. They grasp the muscles on either side of my neck, and I think, oh, I'm so tense. I lean back into what I think will be something therapeutic, only the hands are moving now, over the top of my shoulders and down onto my chest, where they track down the contours of my breasts and land on my ribs. The monster has me in a full embrace now, laying claim to the ins and outs of my breath, the rise and fall of my chest.

I don't know how I got to this place. I thought I knew all of the demons that visit me at night — the skeleton, the gorilla who tickles me, the vampire. But this creature has somehow gotten past my defenses and staked a position in my life. Next to my stoner buddies, my art world friends, my childhood pals, the monster sits at the big table with us, helps itself to a serving of stuffing, shows up at funerals, clusters around the TV with me and my family during national disasters, lounges on the beach with us as the sun goes down.

I want it close to me when I am confused, when I am asking myself what to do next. I want the monster beside me when I measure myself against those whom I admire, when I am imagining myself into my talents and pushing against the boundaries of what I already know. I want the monster right up against me, tantalizing me with long kisses and teasing me liquid until I beg to be penetrated in places I didn't know I had.

I want the monster inside me, reminding me that I can be anything I choose, even if I'm alone. I don't mind if the monster stays or goes, because I'm already so frightened I can hardly breathe.

