

OP-ED

A message to the netherworld

By Patricia Schultheis
Baltimore Sun

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Oct 30, 2014 at 11:25 am

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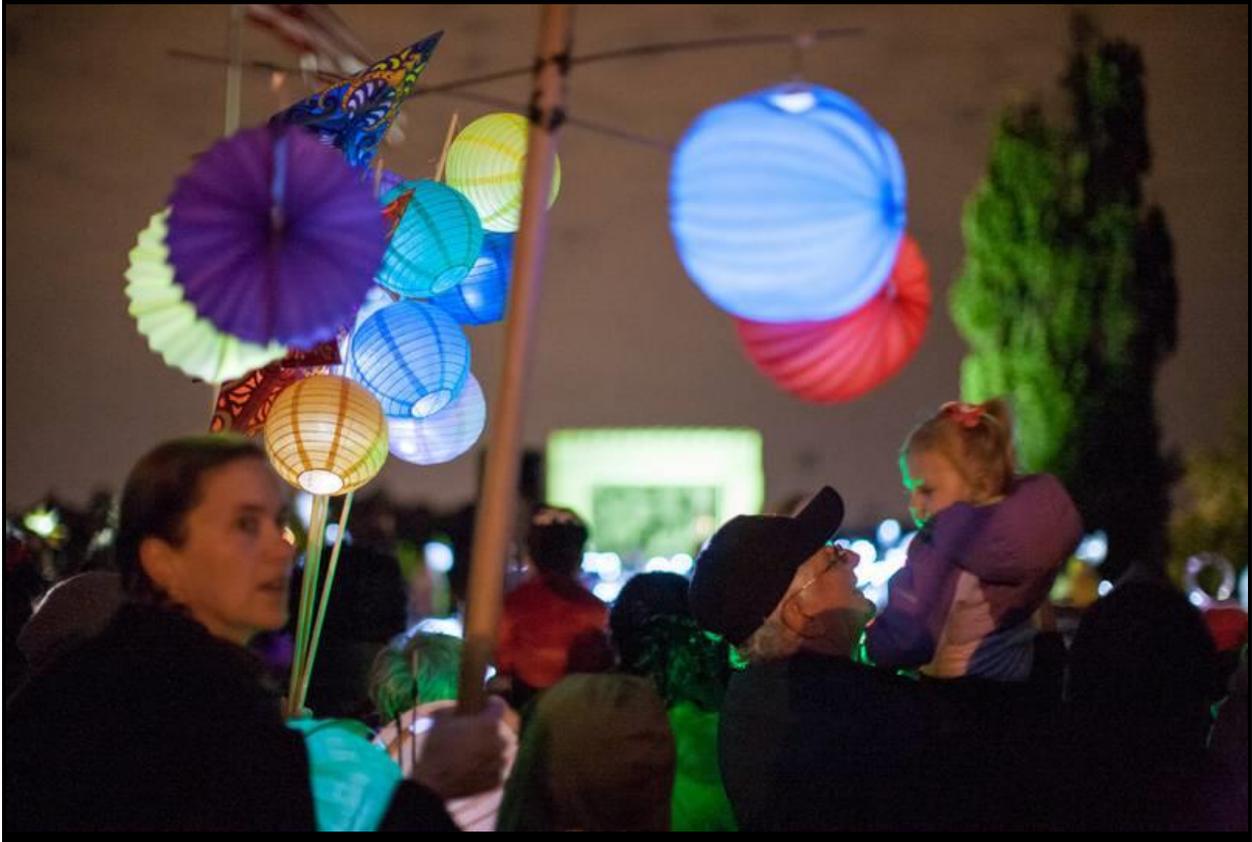








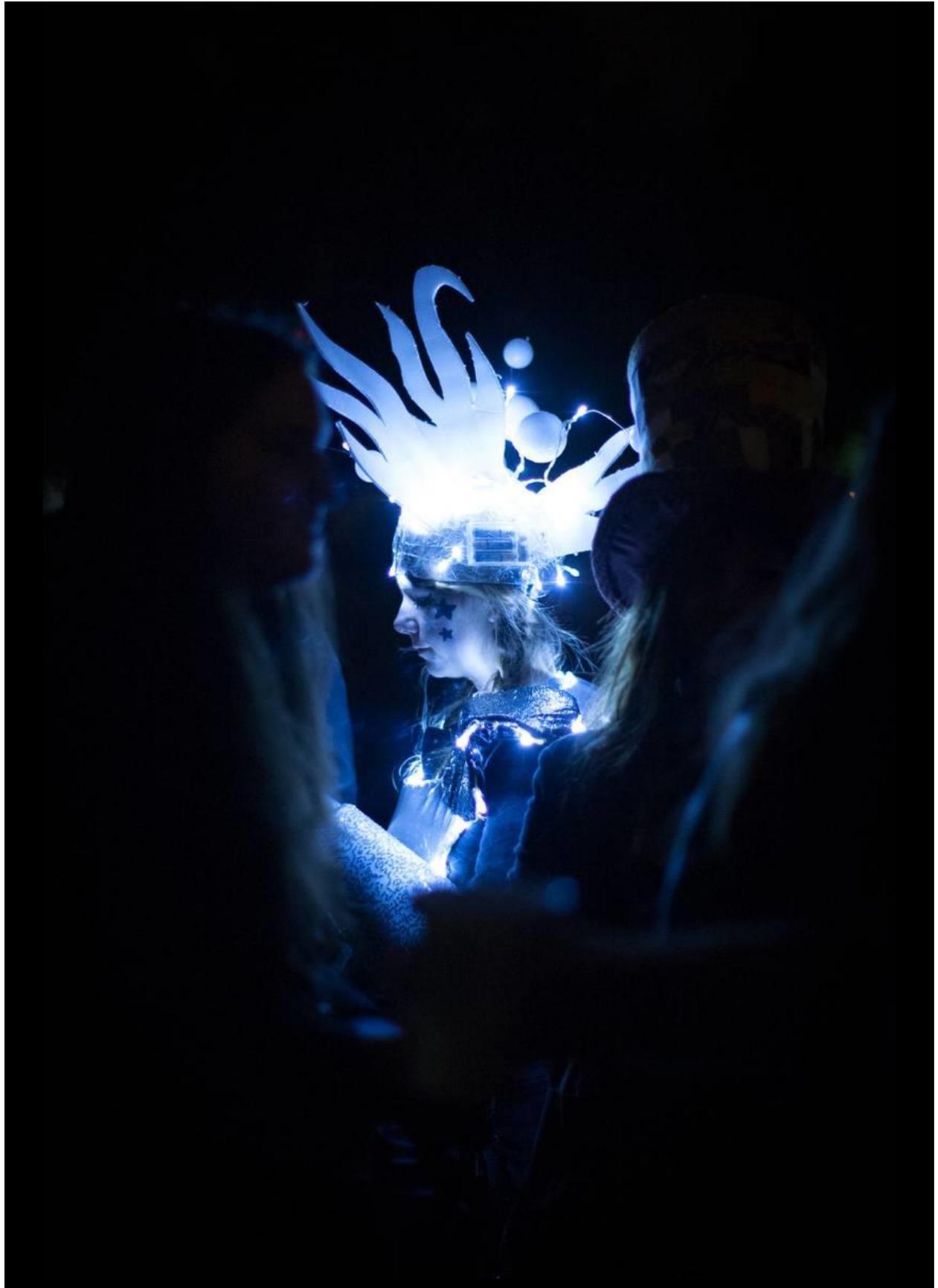


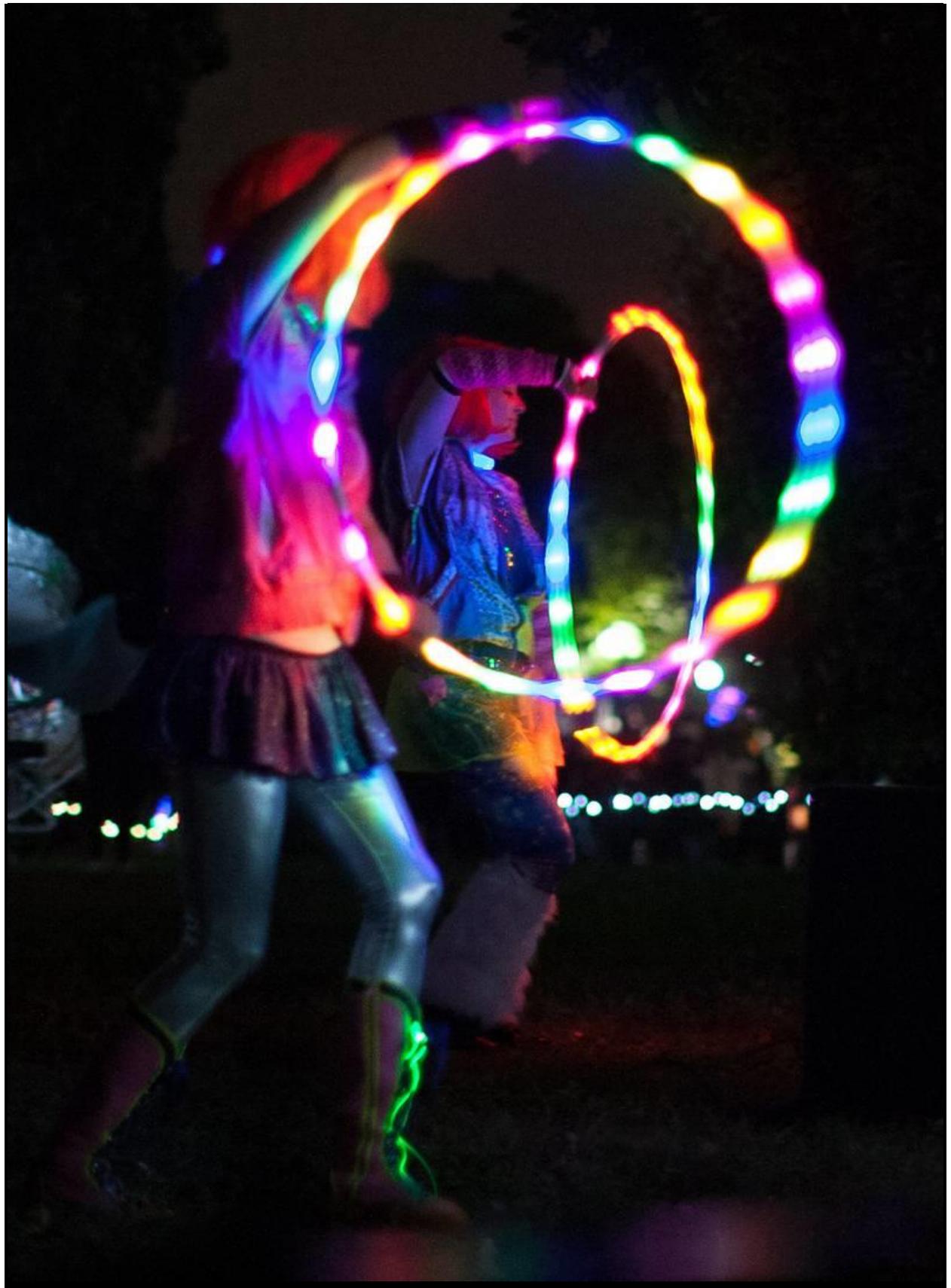










































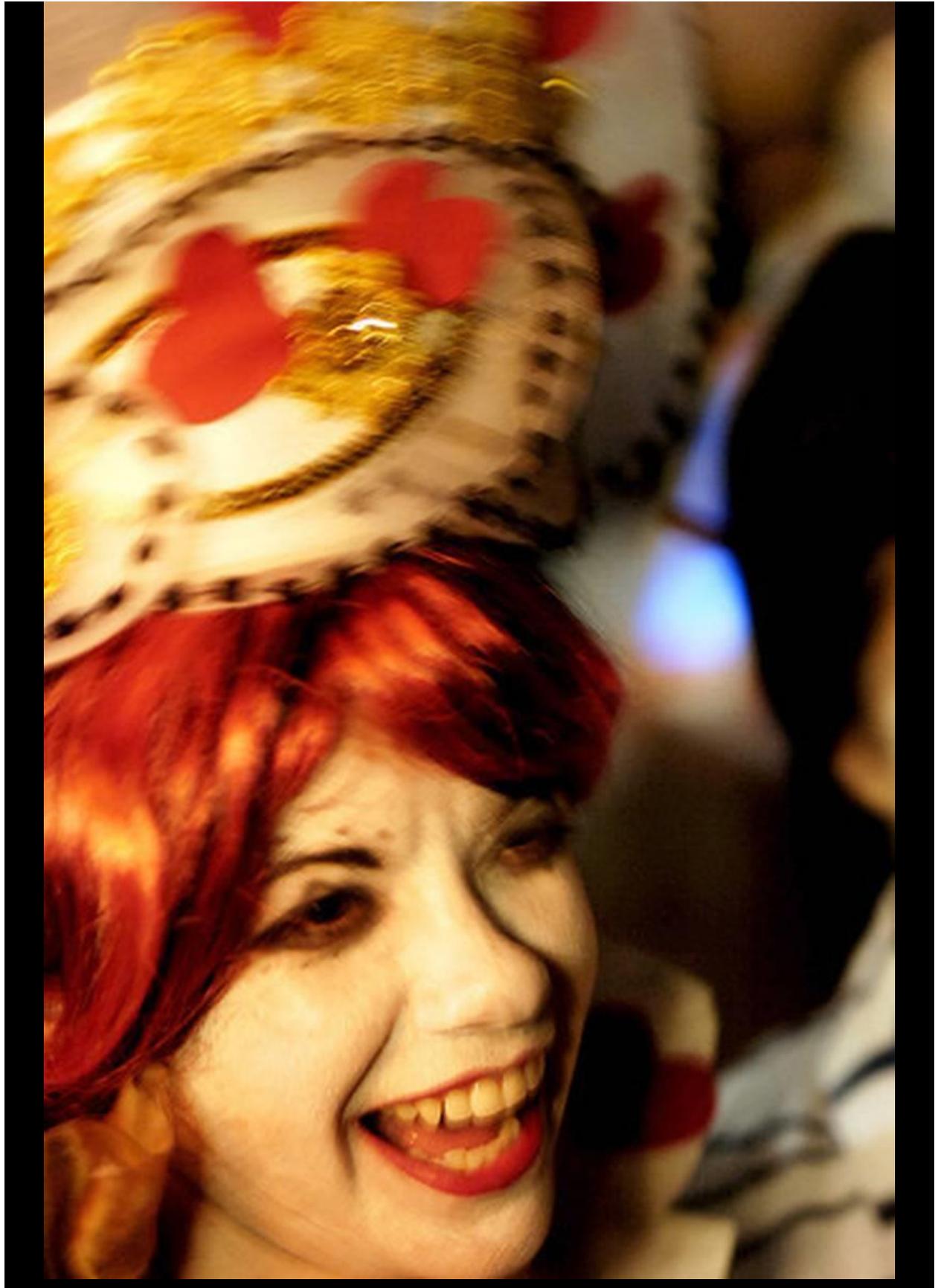






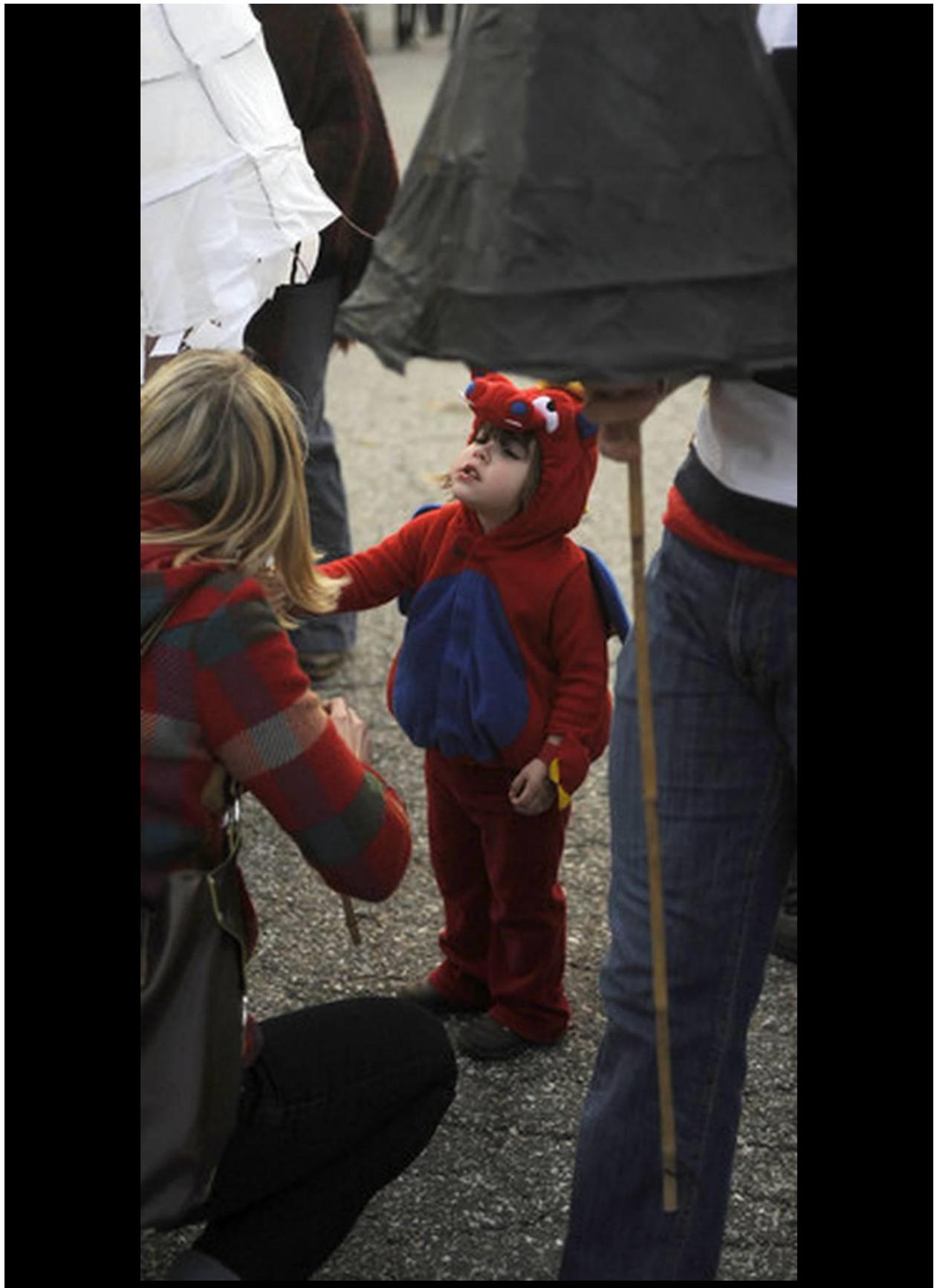








































The annual Halloween Lantern Parade at Patterson Park. (Kaitlin Newman, Baltimore Sun)

Blessed with an appetite for good Italian sausage served with peppers and onions, as well as an abundant curiosity, I took myself to The Great Halloween Lantern Parade and Festival last Saturday night without knowing quite what to expect. The only person I'd ever met who had seen the parade described it as "Fantastic ... incredible ... amazing," but beyond that words failed her, leaving me to realize that if my curiosity was going to be satisfied, I'd have to do it myself.

So, after buying my sausage from a food truck, I settled in just west of the Pulaski Monument and waited for whatever would come. The twilight sky over old Baltimore was fading from pink to lavender, while before me a steady stream of young parents pushed light-festooned baby strollers toward the parade's staging area at Patterson Park's boat lake. Others hurrying in the same direction held tight to the hands of a haloed princess or a laser-toting Superman (apparently costumes aren't constrained by the same rules as metaphors: you can mix 'em however you please).



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As the darkness deepened, the procession of costumed creatures became more phantasmagorical — all of them heading toward the lake and a steady beat of drums that grew so loud it nearly engulfed me.

Between the shoulders of the other spectators I spied a cluster of giant, disembodied glowing heads swaying on poles slowly approaching. Thousands of lights were slowly moving through the darkness, like the beads of a hundred illuminated rosaries passing through unseen fingers. What followed were monumental illuminated creations — butterflies with fluttering wings, a dinosaur, a spider — and marvelous bands, all of them interspersed among ordinary folk carrying lanterns bobbling on slim sticks. It truly was fantastic, incredible, amazing.

According to anthropologists, Halloween has its roots in the Celtic celebration of Samhain, when the seasons transitioned from harvest's bounty to winter's scarcity, and the barrier between the living and spirit worlds grew thin and porous. To ward off unwelcome encounters with roving spirits, people disguised themselves as something other than human by wearing animal pelts. As Christianity took hold, the Catholic Church tried to co-opt the practice by redirecting its focus away from the netherworld and toward

heaven. The result was the establishment of All Saints Day, a special holy day on the liturgical calendar.

It didn't work, trust me. Anyone who's ever gone to a Catholic school as I did knows that All Saints Day falls on November 1st, which meant you didn't have to go to school the day after Halloween, which meant you got to stay up later and get more stuff.

After watching last Saturday's lantern parade I think there's another reason why the celebration of Halloween persists. We humans are tempted to hang our toes over the rim of the netherworld and look down, especially this time of year when the days grow shorter, and the wind colder. How else are we going to show whatever we sense lurking down there that we're not afraid? To emphasize the point, we beat drums and light lights. And we march together and have a good time — for some of us a very good time, indeed.

The lantern parade not only satisfied my curiosity, it renewed my faith in Baltimore's capacity to rejuvenate itself. Many of the people pushing strollers or holding the hands of princesses and supermen were young, and the princesses and supermen were younger still. In the weeks leading up to the parade, some of them made the lanterns they carried at the [Creative Alliance](#), up the street from the park. The alliance co-produces the parade along with the Friends of Patterson Park. In other words, this glorious, quirky event is a product of local initiative and ingenuity. More than the monumental creations or the bobbling lanterns, it was this locally-generated energy that cast a light against the night and reduced its sense of menace to mere mysteriousness.

And when the parade was over I was hungry for more. The night was still young and I felt that way too, so I went to visit a friend in Little Italy, because the days may shorten and the wind blow cold, but in old Baltimore, the good times roll on forever.

Patricia Schultheis is a writer living in Dickeyville. She is the author of "Baltimore's Lexington Market" (Arcadia Publishing). Her email is bpschult@yahoo.com.