

# The Crow's Quill

FEBRUARY 2022

**TWISTED LOVE**

## **TALES OF GOTHIC DELIGHT**

Let these dark stories of love gone wrong guide you through fear, loss, heartache, and perhaps, toward a little bit of hope.

## **FIRST LOOKS**

Get a sneak peek at all the macabre stories in our upcoming anthology *Eros & Thanatos*

## *Poetry Interludes*

Celebrate the release of our upcoming dark romance anthology by delving into rich poetry by two talented members of the Crow community.

*Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.*



**QUILL & CROW  
PUBLISHING HOUSE**

# CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Please be advised that the stories included in our magazine fall under the genres of horror and Gothic fiction. As such, there are elements and themes that may be upsetting or triggering.

You will find an **index of triggers** at the end of the magazine should you wish to apply your own personal discretion. We have done our best to identify potential triggers but we apologize deeply if we missed something.

While we do not promote stories with gratuitous gore or exploitative events, we understand the importance of communicating transparently with our readers and establishing our community as a safe space.

Yours,  
**QUILL & CROW**  
**PUBLISHING HOUSE**



# ABOUT THE HOUSE

Quill & Crow Publishing House is a quaint and curious press dedicated to promoting the integrity of independent literature. Specializing in all things gothic and macabre, we strive to preserve the upmarket prose while lifting up voices often unheard.

Quill & Crow is not your typical publishing house. Not only because we love bleeding heart poetry and all things odd & macabre, but because we are family. Each one of us brings something amazing & unique to the table.

Whether you are joining us as an author, poet, or just want to hang out as a Friend of the Crows, you are welcomed and appreciated...

...and we will probably feed you.



QUILL & CROW PUBLISHING HOUSE

*Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.*

# A MESSAGE FROM THE CROW

Ah, February.

In Northeast Ohio, where Quill & Crow Publishing House was born, we see some of our coldest, snowiest days. For most, February also means Valentine's Day.

A quick review of my poetry or even my novels will quickly let you know I have a rather tragic view of love, and you could probably make the connection between that and my obsession with Gothic horror. At its roots, Gothic fiction is romantic, but it is a dark sort of romance that rips at the heart and twists the emotions. You can safely assume that makes February a pretty big deal around this Gothic press.

Not only is our anthology, *Eros & Thanatos: An Anthology of Death & Desire*, dropping in time for Valentine's Day weekend, but this issue is filled with stories of Twisted Love. We have a few poems in this issue, including the debut of our first "Friend of the Crows," Barlow Adams. Our Dark Poetry Society Blog will also see its resurgence this month, so we hope you will check out our "Broken Hearted" poetry as well.

It is our hope that however you view love—as a hopeless romantic or a bitter critic—you will cozy up and enjoy our tales.

Dreadfully Yours,  
*Cassandra L. Thompson*  
Cassandra L. Thompson

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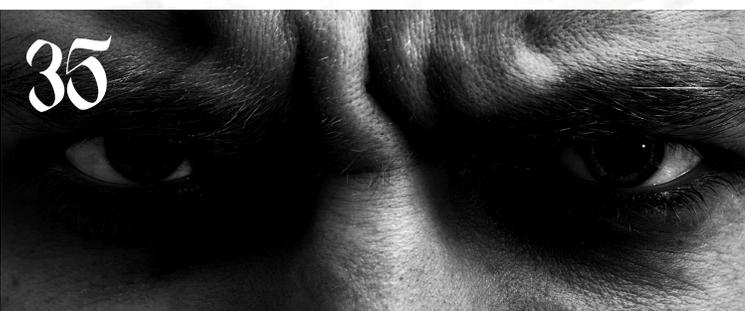


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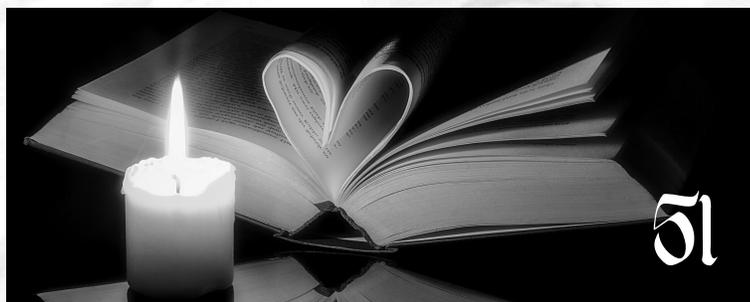
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With gratitude, from associate editors **Damon Barret Roe** and **K.R. Wieland**.



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A comprehensive list of any and all content that may be disturbing to some of our cherished readers.



A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

Months after mushrooms and soft words, he's with her again, looking up at her from the bottom of the pyre. He's bleeding from a thousand lacerations, and one of his turquoise eyes is puffed up so badly, he cannot open it. The stones pelt his back and his legs, but he stopped feeling the impact of them a long time ago. She looks down at him, and she does not strain against the ropes that bind her to the stake. Her bare feet must be so sore perched on jagged hunks of firewood, but she doesn't complain.

"This isn't the life for us, but there will be others."

He wants to answer her, but something is broken in his throat, so he answers with his eyes.

"I'll love you as a beggar, or a queen, or even as a mayfly. Whatever comes next, I'll be there, and I'll love you. Will you promise to be there too?"

The boy can barely see her through the haze of blood and tears, but he nods emphatically. His mouth opens, emitting nothing but a weak croak, and he mouths the words: "I'll find you."

YOU AGAIN  
BY JEREMY MEGARGEE

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# When It Rains



WRITTEN BY  
JACOB STEVEN MOHR

I'm awake before she knocks. Tap, ta-ta-tap, against the glass panel. She was on the high school snare line; rhythm lives in her knuckles, hard-wired. I'm out of bed and on my feet, crossing the bedroom. Now the window's pried open, and she's pouring through, collapsing like she's got no bones inside her. This is how it always starts, but my heart still picks up the beat—like it's one of Lisey's snares, taut under my pajamas. She pries off the hardwood, dripping all over. There's not much light to see, but she's beautiful. Any idiot could see she's beautiful. The kind of pretty you buy those glamor magazines to see.

Outside, it's raining. It seems like it's always raining now.

She talks with her eyes mostly. *Glad to see you—This weather's shitty—I love you.* The silence takes out any muddled meanings. She touches my shoulder, grinning; her skin's cold from the rain. I get the towel and when she rubs herself dry, it poofs her hair out all over. I laugh—into my hand, so my parents don't get



**"I hold her so  
tight, I'm afraid  
she'll break, until  
the shaking  
stops."**

up. And she laughs too, silently, so hard it shakes her whole slender body. I've missed that smile; it hardly matters that I can't hear the laugh with it.

It's all familiar, comforting. Enough so I forget and start feeling good, start hoping. Maybe it'll be different now. Maybe it'll outlast the rain this time.

Lisey's impatient—she throws the towel down and pushes her mouth against me. We fall back, against the foot of the bed. I'm damned all over again, condemned. I think maybe she knows what's coming; it chases her rhythm like greyhounds around the track, after the digital rabbit. It's warmer under the blankets, even if she's still damp and slick with mud. We tangle together, pressing close. But my hands never flutter lower than her waist. She only had to stop me once. Even now, I understand there are some forbidden places, some barriers we can't trespass. We dance along those electric lines, but in the end, the choice isn't ours.

Maybe you've heard this story before. Maybe you know it already.

Too soon, too soon—powerful energy builds outside like a towering hum. Lisey tenses against me; her hands make fists in my clothes. I'm pressed so close I can feel her rhythm quickening. Not a heartbeat but some even more primal vibration, something that persists. She feels it coming a second before I do...and now through the curtains, I see lightning slash the sky. Then thunder, like an earthquake, like a small apocalypse. It shakes every window in the house.

I feel her go tight all over. She's so stiff that for a moment I can picture it, actually imagine where she really is. But I don't dwell. She's starting to talk, finally.

"Hi—it's me, silly. I'm only a few minutes out now, you'd better be ready. It's really starting to come down out here. I've got my wipers going full steam, but I can barely see... Oh, there's your street. I see you now, just let me—hold on, there's..."

I press my hand over her mouth; it smothers the screech I know comes next. The first time, she bit me so hard it drew blood. I told my parents I fell, that the scar was an old one. This time she relents to the stifle; now she's shaking against me; now she's crying, sobbing, though her sobs sound like a long, even hiss, like a rush of static... No tears come out either.

She talks with her body mostly. *I'm scared—I'm cold—Don't let me go again.*

I hold her so tight, I'm afraid she'll break, until the shaking stops. Soon she goes still; maybe she's really asleep. Her chest goes up and down, but there's no peace on her face. I try to stay awake. But cradling Lisey to my chest, eventually my eyes push closed. There's rhythm inside her still. It's the rhythm of the rain, driving down, rocking me, lulling back into oblivion.



The next morning's Saturday. Lisey's gone—the clock's red numbers say six. I'm not awake but I haul upright; my bed, my clothes, all muddy from her. The room smells like her, and the rain. The house is still asleep. I one-foot hop, sliding on sweatpants, and I towel up the puddle she left on the hardwood near my bed. Then I creep through the dark house, out the front door. The world is so quiet after a storm. No cars, no birds singing yet. The light is hazy and there's a gauzy white mist curling off the road. I walk maybe ten minutes.

I go to the churchyard. I go to the grave. Maybe you've heard this story before.

*A young man out traveling meets a strange woman on the road; as a gentleman in those times, he puts his coat on her shoulders against the bitter cold and wind. They come to a crossroads—a bell chimes, and suddenly the young woman has vanished, taking the man's coat with her.*

*Later in town, none of the locals know the woman, even when he gives her name; it's only by accident that the youth recovers his lost property. His coat is draped across a headstone in the town graveyard. It bears the name of his ghostly companion.*

But Lisey leaves no sign. There's no coat of mine, no borrowed sweatshirt, no scarf. The earth isn't even disturbed. There aren't footprints leaving or coming back. She's here. I'm here too.

My phone in my pants pocket, heavy as lead now. Pull it out, numb fingers moving across the touch screen. Play the voicemail on speakerphone. Her voice. Her last words.

“Hi—it's me, silly. I'm only a few minutes out now, you'd better be ready. It's really starting to come down out here. I've got my wipers going full steam, but I can barely see... Oh, there's your street. I see you now, just let me—hold on, there's...”

A screech of brakes, a harsh roar of twisting metal impact. Then a long thin hiss of static.

I put the phone away; my hands find the top of the gravestone as feeling takes me over, bending me forward, pushing me to earth. The teachers, the kids in the hallway... their stares are a cage. And my house is too quiet; my parents hold their breath, walking on eggshells. But here I can feel Lisey sobbing against me, terrified of the thunder. I can hear her breath quicken because the rain is too hard, coming down too fast to see through, even with the windshield wipers going full blast. I can see her

searching for me in the dark, that first night, finding me.

Refusing to move on. Me, refusing to let go. Loving her still.

It won't last. Nothing lasts—not the rain, not Lisey's visits. Not even this lingering eulogy. Soon she'll sleep; I want it for her, desperately. A part of me wants it. But the other part is a dark hole, crumbling at the edges, yawning wider and hungrier in me. That part's scared of the thunder too. One night it'll rain, and she won't come back. I won't even look for her. The rhythm at my window will be tree branches, or a bird's beak, or nothing at all. It makes me a little crazy sometimes, thinking about it, but only a little. I guess it's all I think about now.

The world starts to wake up around me. I hear a car's engine in the distance, the low squeal of tires on wet pavement. My feet start back towards the house. The mist hasn't cleared. The tires are closer; maybe it's on the same street, coming at me, blind as Lisey's driver. I don't look for it. My sneakers dance along the centerline of the road, back and forth—to Lisey's rhythm.

My eyes are in the pale sky; I'm looking for rain clouds.



# Jacob Steven Mohr



**Don't buy the hype: Jacob Steven Mohr was not raised by wolves. Feral children are capable of many things, but weaving wild words into flesh and fantasy isn't one of them. Lucky us. If it were, we'd all be speaking Wolf.**

**Mohr's work has previously appeared in All Dark Places 3, Tales of Sley House 2021, and Night Terrors vol. 20.**

**He lives in Columbus, OH.**

**Twitter: @jacobstevenmohr.**

A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

Sometimes the notes of her music came from the trees, or the wind, or the sigh of wilting flower petals. Always, the rhythm came from her heart. The magic demanded it be so. Each dawn, Mae stood in the garden, toes pressed into the moon-cooled earth. Tucking her violin beneath her chin, she played her music for herself and the rising sun, the black beetles flying between what little managed to grow beside her home. Mostly, she played for the witch's bones, so they would stay quiet and still and dead.

Enough power rattled within the skeleton to make good on the witch's vow to return one day and raze the nearby village that had conspired against her in life. The magic in Mae's song helped the bones sleep, and kept the village prosperous. But all magic, even when used for good, required sacrifice.

## HEART SONG BY KAYLA WHITTLE

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# Porcelain Flesh



WRITTEN BY  
E.P. STAVS

“You’re back early.” I turned in my seat, watching as Benjamin’s heavy boots tread lightly down the cellar stairs. For such a large man, he moved with a grace equal to the finest ballerinas. And I would know—once upon a time, that’d been me.

Before the accident.

“Dr. Franc was actually on time for once,” Benjamin replied, ducking his head to avoid a beam. He placed a package wrapped in brown paper on the work table. “And with just the piece I needed.”

My heart fluttered in anticipation as I eyed the parcel. “You don’t mean...”

“Yes.” He moved behind me, long fingers caressing my shoulders as he gently turned me to face the cracked mirror of my vanity. He smoothed my hair away from my face and brushed the tender flesh of my ruined cheek. “Tonight, your rehabilitation will be complete.”

I took a deep breath, fighting the urge to jump up and dance around the room. Eleven months, two weeks, and five days spent living in this dank cellar, a ghost to



**“Surely, he would not  
have forgotten.  
Surely, he would still  
want me despite my  
recent...adaptations.”**

the world above. And tonight would finally be the end of it all.

“Will you take me to him tonight?”

A pause. Then, “Take you to whom?”

I frowned. “To Henri, of course.”

“No. It's too soon. You'll need to rest, to heal. Let the leeches work their magic.”

“I've done nothing but rest for almost a year, Benjamin. Please, I need to see him.”

He sighed. “He thinks you're dead, you know. Everyone does.”

“Of course I know that,” I retorted, shrugging his hands off my shoulders as I faced him. “I was the one who convinced you to keep it that way. I could hardly allow Henri and all my fans to see me like this. Like some kind of...of *monster*.”

“You're not a monster, Cécile,” Benjamin stated, his deep voice filled with emotion. “You're a survivor.” He swallowed, his gaze dropping to my lips. “You're beautiful,” he whispered.

My indignation melted as quickly as it flared. What was I doing, snapping at this man? He was my anchor in the storm, my savior from the flames. When everyone else had fled for their lives, he'd run into the fire without any care for himself. He may have been a lowly stagehand, but that night—the night the chandelier had fallen, crashing into the stage and lighting the curtains on fire while I'd danced my infamous solo—he'd become my own, personal hero. “And you are too kind,” I whispered back, touching his whiskered cheek. “Much, much too kind. Tying yourself to one such as me.”

“I would do anything for you, Cécile,” he replied, gaze firmly fixed on the floor.

“I know you would, Benjamin. You always have. And you'll do so again tonight, as you stitch the final piece of my life back together.”

He nodded. “As you wish.” Straightening to his full, imposing height, he held out a hand, guiding me out of my chair and over to the table. With arms strengthened from years of labor, he lifted me up and placed me on the table as gently as if I were a porcelain doll.

But I wasn't made of porcelain. I was made of flesh—scraps leftover from Dr. Franc's many experiments, purchased with Benjamin's meager savings, and kept on ice until he could stretch them over my scorched remains and sew them into place. Once the toast of the town, I was now nothing more than a patched-up rag doll. But still, I held out hope that maybe, just maybe, I could reclaim some of my former glory. The prima donna of The Paris Opera Ballet, gliding through life on the arm of

the richest and most sought-after bachelor in the city: Henri Belmont, my fiancé.

I downed the whiskey Benjamin offered and laid back on the rough wooden table, eyes squeezed shut in anticipation of the inevitable pain. “I’m ready.”



I waited until nightfall to make my appearance, well after the lamplighter had passed by, illuminating the street with the soft glow of candlelight. It’d been a full week since Benjamin had stitched the final piece of my face back together, and the anticipation of this moment had nearly driven me mad. For there, not ten meters in front of me, was the door to Henri’s flat. The windows above were fully lit, proclaiming their master at home. All I needed to do was walk over and knock, and my love would see that his Cécile was not lost, after all.

Surely, it would come as a relief.

I gripped the collar of my pelisse, pulling it as high as it would go before checking that the black, net veil covering my face was still securely pinned in place. My heart pounded against my rib cage as I crept forward, fist raising as I approached the door. I froze in place as I worried my lower lip.

He’d told me he loved me. That I was the very air that gave him life. Surely, he would not have forgotten. Surely, he would still want me despite my recent...adaptations.

There was nothing for it but to knock. Three short raps to call forth the man I’d pined for all those nights, hidden away in the cellar beneath the charred remains of the opera house. I held my breath as I waited, listening for footsteps on the stairs. As the minutes ticked by, my worry increased, until my palms were damp with sweat inside my long, white gloves. I knocked again, louder this time.

At last, the pounding of footsteps sounded! I pasted a smile on my face, heart in my throat as I watched the knob turn and the door swing open to reveal—

Henri. Half-dressed with tousled hair and lipstick smeared across his face. Perfume wafted off him, invading my nostrils and lining my stomach with lead. *So he’s taken a lover. What of it? I’m sure she’s nothing more than a dalliance. Something to distract him from his loss.*

“Yes? What do you want, I’m rather busy at the moment,” he snapped, his gaze raking over me with indifference.

I clutched my reticule against my bodice as I gathered every ounce of courage I could muster. “H-hello, Henri.” I swallowed. “It’s me, Cécile.” When he failed to

respond, I added, “Cécile Belshaw. Your fiancé.”

“That’s—” he took a step closer, eyes narrowing as he attempted to see my face past the veil, “impossible. Cécile Belshaw died last winter, in the Opera House Fire.”

“A rumor, nothing more. I would have come to you sooner, but I...I needed time to recover.” My hands fluttered about my veil, but I was reluctant to lift it while he was staring at me with such obvious suspicion. “As you see, I’m very much alive. Your Cécile.”

“I see nothing of the sort,” he spat. “What kind of sick game are you playing at, woman? If you’re looking for money, you’ll not get a single coin out of me.”

There was no other choice. I had to reveal myself. With shaking hands, I lifted the black netting that obscured my mottled face, body held rigid as he took a step closer, eyes squinting in the dim light.

“Holy mother of God,” he breathed, jumping back and crossing himself. “What madness is this?”

Had I still been capable of blushing, my cheeks would surely have been aflame. “When the stage caught fire, one of the beams collapsed on top of me, and my face and chest were burned horribly. I would have died had one of the stagehands not come to my rescue. But,” I hurried to add, seeing the disgust etched across his handsome face, “the damage has been mostly repaired. There are scars, of course, but —”

“Scars?” Henri interrupted, his voice incredulous. He gestured toward my face. “This...this monstrosity is more than just a few scars. It’s an abomination.”

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes. “Henri?”

His lips curled in disgust. “To walk the earth looking like that, you’d have been better off dying in that damned fire.” His eyes widened as a sudden thought took hold. “Who else knows of this? Who else knows you’re alive?”

“J-just Benjamin, the stagehand I mentioned.”

He took a menacing step forward. “No one else?”

I shook my head. “None.”

“Our engagement has been forfeit for months,” he continued. “I’ll not be shackled to someone as monstrous as you are now.”

“But, Henri—”

“Don’t speak my name with such familiarity,” he snapped. “It makes me positively ill.”

“Henri, please.” I reached out to touch his arm, and he reeled away.

“Get out of my sight,” he hissed. “Better yet, leave Paris altogether. If I see that wretched face of yours again, I’ll shoot you on sight.”

“You don’t mean that,” I sobbed, legs trembling beneath me. “You don’t—”

“Perhaps I should shoot you now,” Henri interrupted, “and free the world of your hideous existence.”

I shrunk back, fear overtaking sorrow as he reached for something inside the door. Surely, he wasn’t serious. He wouldn’t actually kill his former lover over a few scars...would he?

A shadow fell over me as I stood rooted to the sidewalk. A deep voice whispered in my ear as a hand wrapped around my face, covering my eyes.

“Don’t look.”

There was a shout as the man thrust his other hand forward, once, twice, three times. Something warm and wet splattered across the bottom half of my face as he made a final slash.

Familiar arms pressed my face against a broad chest that smelled of oil and sweat. “Hold on, love. I’ll bring you someplace safe, I promise. I just need to hide this worthless villain from prying eyes.” He released me, and I slowly opened my eyes to see Benjamin dragging Henri’s bloody body away from the door. He shrugged off his overcoat and wrapped it around the corpse before hefting it over his shoulder. Easing the door shut, he finally met my eyes, and I could see the mixture of rage and worry in his. “I had to do it,” he whispered. “He was going to kill you, Cécile. He was...” His voice broke. “I couldn’t let him do that. Not to you. I’m sorry.”

I took a tremulous step forward and wiped his cheek, red stains streaking my pristine glove. “You’re always saving me,” I whispered. “Why, Benjamin? Why save someone like me?”

“Someone like you?” He caught my hand in his, holding it in place. “Cécile, for me, there is no one *but* you. You are everything that is bright and beautiful in this world, and I...” His voice grew husky as he held my gaze, and I thought my heart might burst from the fervency I saw reflected back at me. “I love you.”

Eleven months, three weeks, and five days I had been a complete and utter fool. The man I’d dreamed of was nothing more than a porcelain mask, but this person before me was flesh and blood. He was my happy ever after. Stretching up on the tips of my toes, I sealed our future with a kiss, the blood of my former obsession burning my tongue as it slipped into my new lover’s mouth.

A kiss worthy of a love as twisted as ours.

# E.P. Stavs



E.P. Stavs is the author of the Young Adult fantasy romance series *The Shendri*, as well as the New Adult psychological thriller *Split Therapy*, and various gothic horror shorts.

When she isn't writing, she's usually reading, mom-ing, or simply being a fun-loving nerd.

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A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

Cobalt blue now threatened to swallow the sky whole, and he knew the time was upon him. A thick, contented sigh escaped his throat, eyes sweeping the valley beneath him. Roving over every roof, treeline and road, over the humans going about their evening tasks, their menial existences of no interest to him.

Apart from one.

Auburn hair fluttered in the wind, lilac dress billowing behind. Not a care in the world this woman had as she almost skipped her way down the main street. Dancing between other townsfolk and into the iron-fenced graveyard...the graveyard.

He smirked. How fitting. Pulling the surrounding shadow into himself, his features and appearance took the form he required. Statuesque Adonis and adorned entirely in black no less, he stalked towards the town. Death had a debt to settle, and as autumn began to call summer home, it was time to collect.

**MOMENTO MORI**  
BY MELANIE WHITLOCK

A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

Beneath the blue screen, she searched for articles about the robbery, uncovering trauma she'd thought she'd buried. She remembered the robber's gun waving. She remembered her heart swelling in her throat, and the feeling of helplessness that came over her in the back corner of the store where the spirits were. She remembered the man with the glasses standing beside her in his gray suit.

He breathed heavily, already drunk and smelling of decay, despite the fact that he carried a briefcase and wore a collared shirt and tie. The robber made his way toward them and demanded their valuables. Erin's finger swelled over the band of her engagement ring. The robber grew impatient. He fired a shot at the ceiling. He fired a shot at the wall. Then the man with the glasses inserted himself between them. He held out his hand and tried to keep the robber calm.

*"Nobody needs to die, alright?"*

## HOSTAGES

BY REBECCA JONES-HOWE



A CROW'S

# POETRY INTERLUDE



Dressed  
In her armour  
Of lace baroque  
She haunts my dreams

Mania  
Controlling my every thought  
Movements glide into one with her

Compelled  
This vixen of the night  
Promises treasures beyond  
Any wild imagination

Catch  
My veins belong to her

**FIZZY TWIZLER**

A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



## AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

She snatched the little sprig, threw it down, and crushed the flowers into the earth. A thrill raced up her spine at the brittle *snap* as it broke underfoot.

Ide's breath slowed to shallow pants. Ora bent down to pick up the broken gift, cradling it delicately in her palms.

"I should have given it to you another time," she sighed, her voice low and detached. "Or not at all. They do resemble apple blossoms rather strongly...I'm sorry."

Ide's heart sank as her attendant let the remains fall back to the ground, before disappearing between the rows. Stooping down to examine the broken sprig only made her feel so much worse because she'd been wrong.

These torn petals weren't pink, but a soft white, and unfamiliar down to the lingering scent. The leaves were wrong too, jagged and rough. With each difference, Ide found her mistake more unbelievable. Her stomach twisted remembering the hurt in Ora's voice.

## BLOOD, APPLES, BLACKBERRY WINE

BY ASHLEY VAN ELSWYK

A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

Meredith frowned at the shameless desecration of this space that, to her, had become almost sacred.

Instantly determined to put right that which had been wronged, she attacked the mess with vigor. The trash was collected and placed in the bin, the furniture wiped down and returned to its rightful positions, the bed stripped, straightened, and remade. She even cleaned the windows and the floor. When she finished, the suite was spotless, and every aspect of the room had been arranged to exactly mirror the way she remembered it. It was then that Death walked through the door.

A solitary figure, tall and lean, stood in the doorway wearing a floor-length, midnight blue dressing gown. His face was pallid and gaunt with high cheekbones that framed dark, deep-set eyes, and a sullen expression. A thick mane of coal black hair curled down about his temples and rested upon his slender shoulders.

*He is beautiful,* Judge Taylor's words rang out in the back of her mind.

## A COLD ROOM BY NEWTON

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# In the Water

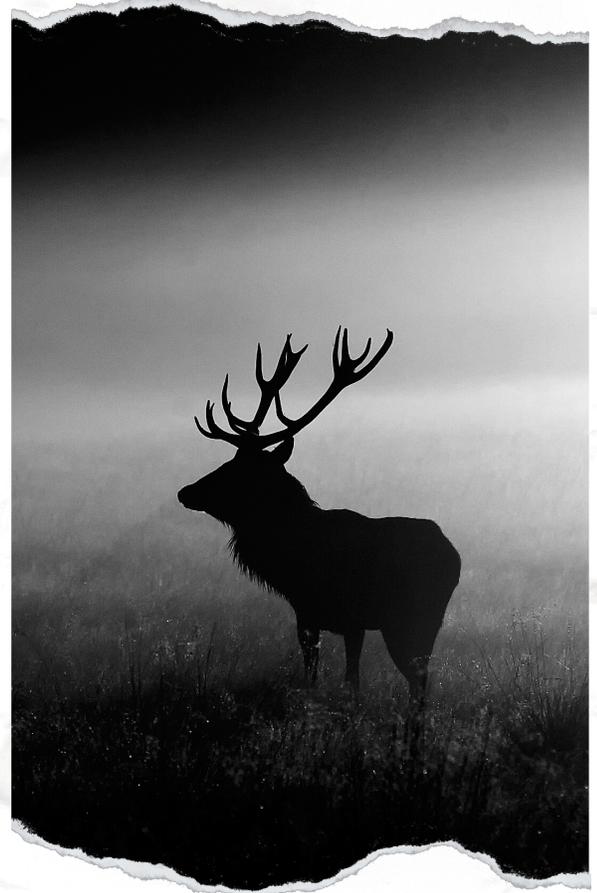


WRITTEN BY  
ADAM M. FADEREWSKI

*The boy must never see his face—not in a mirror  
or portrait—or it shall be his downfall.*

The words settled in their minds upon the birth of their only child. A wealthy merchant couple, they had planned to maintain residence in the artisan-filled, jeweler-lush city, but opportunities for their son to see his reflection crowded the area.

The father had commissioned one of the city's most sought-after painters for a family portrait once his wife recovered from childbirth, but canceled it. All preparations were cast aside as the household removed all reflective surfaces from the building, including silver platters that had been a gracious wedding gift from a wealthy benefactor. Hasty plans were drawn for the sale of the manor, and relatives and friends feared the couple had fallen into madness. All attempts to dissuade the pair from spontaneously abandoning lush life in the city for a humble, solitary one



**"His heart raced but  
he felt comforted  
that his companion  
also seemed to be at  
a loss for words."**

in the country fell upon unreceptive ears.

The parents aided the majority of the household staff to find employment with nearby merchants, while others desired to remain with the family. These servants insisted they could help them become acquainted with the countryside.

The parents graciously accepted them and promised to expand the new cottage to accommodate all who volunteered.



Eighteen years later, the boy, Nathan, grew up in a residence that no longer resembled the one his parents had purchased. The quaint picket fence was replaced by ivy-covered slate walls wrapping the perimeter. The modest home had grown massive, with extensive wings for the servants who had remained and those who had returned.

Lavish as the household was, the only paintings were still-life scenes, commissioned or purchased from artists the parents had once patronized. Not a single portrait was upon the walls, an attempt at dissuading the son from wondering why there weren't any of the family. Absent were any mirrors that could reflect his face. Any metal in the household was also dulled—knives, silverware, bathroom fixtures, and bed frames.

Nathan had grown without companions; his parents had attempted to be his friends, as had the servants, but Nathan never knew the camaraderie of someone his age. The boy had been cute as could be in his early years and the staff were often struck by the near-perfection of the child's appearance. As he reached adulthood, there was agreement among the household that Nathan was Adonis reborn, perfection in all aspects of appearance.

The parents knew Nathan would be a much sought-after husband for maidens of wealthy merchants—even heiresses of noble families—but they dared not let him leave the grounds.



One of the few bits of freedom available to Nathan were his trips into the woods, be they leisurely strolls, hikes to his favorite landmarks, or bow hunting. He was always accompanied by his dog, a yellow retriever named Echo for his howls and barks that rang through the halls and high-ceilinged rooms.

On this day, Nathan decided to bring his bow and quiver; an itch at the back of his mind told him he might stumble upon something significant. As he tromped along familiar trails, he heard the hushed roar of the cascading waterfall that fed the forest stream before its exit into the flats. It was his preferred spot to relax and take in the splendor of the woods.

Nathan strolled to the waterfall but halted as he noticed Echo in a rigid pose. He knelt by the dog and rubbed his soft head. “What do you see, boy?” Nathan followed the dog’s gaze.

On the opposite side of the stream, he saw what Echo had spotted—a white stag. Its head was raised, purple eyes sparkling, teeth gnashing whatever morsel it had discovered. The stag had the largest antlers Nathan had ever seen, counting at least ten points.

He calmly inhaled and stood, taking care not to make a sound that would startle the creature. He minded his breath—inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale—as he nocked an arrow.

Taking a last deep breath, he pulled back the bowstring and loosed the arrow.

He cursed as the stag jumped at the arrow leaving his grasp. The enchanted creature raced into the woods and Echo took off after it. The dog leapt over the stream in a single bound and Nathan followed suit.

Echo slowed and raised his snout but the dog appeared at a loss. Nathan slowed next to Echo and dropped his head in disappointment. “It’s almost as if he knew I was about to fire my arrow—as if he were sent for some specific purpose. Can you smell where he went, Echo?”

As Echo sniffed the ground, Nathan’s eyes were drawn to a grouping of purple-trimmed white flowers that seemed to dance though there wasn’t the slightest breeze. He had never seen flowers like them.

As he approached, he noticed they sat on the edge of a pond—a placid body of water, something he had heard of but never seen.

Curiosity compelled him to caress the odd flowers and partake of their perfume. He savored the wonderful fragrance before—almost instinctively—turning to the pond. In its stillness, he saw the most beautiful creature he had ever laid eyes on.

A picture of perfection; glowing eyes, a handsome jawline, shining hair, and plump lips that longed to be kissed.

“I’ve never seen such beauty,” he said.

“Never seen such beauty,” came a reply.

“You want to speak with me?” he asked, taken back by the beauty’s interest in him.

“Speak with me,” the melodic voice replied.

“Are you in the water?” Nathan was intrigued by the beauty and its enthralling voice.

“In the water,” the voice answered.

Nathan mused on how this breathtaking specimen could dwell beneath the surface but Echo broke his reverie with cacophonous barks and nuzzling at Nathan’s arm. He pushed Echo away. “Not now,” he ordered. The dog persisted by biting at his sleeve. “Go away!” Nathan shouted and shoved the dog. Echo yelped and sped into the woods.

“Please forgive me,” Nathan said to the submerged specimen.

“Forgive.”

Nathan smiled. “Thank you, I feared you would leave.”

“Feared you would leave,” the face repeated.

“I’m not used to speaking with others,” Nathan murmured. “Especially one my age and of such beauty.”

“Not used to others. Of such beauty.”

Nathan blushed and made himself comfortable at the pond’s edge. He was at a loss for words as he took in the glorious visage staring back. His heart raced but he felt comforted that his companion also seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Would it be okay if I were to kiss you?” Nathan asked, feeling a rush of blood to his heart, and an unfamiliar fluttering and lightness in his stomach.

“Okay to kiss,” the voice replied and Nathan could hear the same nervous lilt in it.

He leaned forward to touch lips with the water creature and saw a similar timid reaction.

As he neared the surface, he heard the raucous noise of Echo running. The dog leapt into the pond, sending ripples throughout the water. Nathan drew back at the splashing, wiping away the wetness. He searched for his paramour but they were gone.

Standing, he grabbed a rock and threw it at Echo. The dog leapt out of the way. The rock sent further ripples through the pond and Echo stood in place, barking and stamping his paws. Nathan felt a terrible impulse and drew his bow, nocking an arrow. He aimed at his longtime companion.

Echo, sensing the danger, raced away as Nathan loosed the arrow. It landed on the water's edge.

The pond still rippled and Nathan knelt in a panic. "Do you need help?"

"Help."

"Has Echo hurt you?" Nathan's voice quavered.

"Hurt," the answer came, filled with pain.

Nathan cast aside his weapon, kicked off his boots, and removed his belt. He took a few steps back before dashing forward and diving into the pond. The teen broke the surface but as the water reached his shoulders, his body halted.

A tremendous crack pealed through the woods. A roll of thunder followed on its heels.

Nathan's body tumbled limply into the pond, and clouds of red billowed from his neck. The crimson water was drawn to the white flowers on the shoreline and dissipated as it reached their roots—the purple around the edges now shimmering blood red.

Echo whimpered at the pond's edge, watching his lifeless master. A mocking whimper came from the flowers. The dog turned on them and growled.

They returned a chorus of growls louder than his own.

Echo raced away, leaving Nathan behind, his body slowly sinking into the pond's muddy bottom.



# Adam M. Faderewski



Adam M. Faderewski has been telling tales long before he was able to put them to paper. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from Pennsylvania State University, and worked in newsrooms in central and western Pennsylvania for over a decade before moving to Austin, Texas.

Faderewski currently is employed as a social media manager and associate editor for a law journal in Texas. He can often be found at his laptop with a beverage in the Texas sun, longing for a thunderstorm.

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A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

Marlene's heart quakes. It's a visceral discomfort, as ancient as mortality itself. The whispers rage in her ears, seek purchase in her ribcage, bloom outwards down her arms and legs. She can feel herself shivering, distantly, as if it's happening to some other woman foolishly poking around in a room full of dead things.

Bracing, she removes her glove. She hears Lola's sharp intake of breath; some part of her, primal and afraid, notices Lola's fingers clasp the back of her shirt. An anchor, maybe, or else a chain.

When Marlene touches the sun-bleached bones—the smooth planes of a femur—the room upends. Everything falls sideways. The bones shudder, jolting against the moldering lining of the coffin.

The whispers become screams.

## BARED BONES

BY MADDIE BOWEN-SMYTH

A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

A light mist gathered. *Was he talking to the mist?* She couldn't understand. Squinting, the sister thought she saw a glimpse of something, someone, in the swirling void.

His dagger found her throat, and she had time to wonder no more.

With care, he lay the nun on her side, aligning the slit in her neck with the grooves he'd carved before. He positioned her right hand palm up, and took a matchbook from his pocket, fumbling to strike one not coated in blood. Lighting the last candle, he dripped wax into the palm, then used it as a base. He placed the candle and walked to the middle of his dark work...

A pale hand reached for him, a porcelain face tipping forward from the mist, a pouting red mouth. "Then kiss me."

Finally, after all this time, his lips touched hers.

**CAULSTON**  
**BY PERRY WOLFECastle**



## BETWEEN DUSK AND DREAMS

I am a thing of hunger,  
leather and teeth,  
pinned down in your photograph album.  
Because I have wings you call me a butterfly,  
and I squeeze into that space because the true shape of  
me is too horrid to bring to your bedroom door,  
my breath too hot  
on the windows of your car.  
But need rages in my rib cage  
like a moth batters itself against a light,  
spreading the dust of me across your eye lids,  
painting my bones in scandalous tones.  
This thing I contain,  
no less than the whole of me,  
would dash me on the rocks and make me beg for the  
drowning,  
for salt water in my lungs,  
the moisture from every kiss,  
an ill-conceived fuck that demands  
mistake after mistake.  
Sweat on arm hair like dew on grass,  
evaporating in the morning,  
on the way to somewhere bright and boring,  
with no place for night creatures.  
No place for you and me.

BARLOW ADAMS

A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

I often heard them whispering about what lay beneath the sweeping silks and dazzling beads that I crafted for each dancer. They wondered at the slope of their waists, what nestled between their thighs. I wanted to sew their mouths shut, like a rip in burlap tied to a neat seam.

My eyes shot up to the box reserved solely for Niklaus. The music swelled again, and a breeze from the movement onstage shifted the curtain, obscuring me once more. I had been given only a moment. But the moment had been enough.

His eyes held mine as I shrank back into the shadows, spooling the loose silver thread in tight loops around my fingertip. I pulled it tight, the flesh swelling and purpling like a failing organ. He watched as I stepped back from the curtain, gaze following me long past when he could have still seen me.

Did he imagine me? Did I haunt him, all at once, as he haunted me?

**FAIM**

**BY MEGAN BONTRAGER**

A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

The lack of company has never bothered me. Though I live alone, I am far from celibate. I find my pleasure in the comforting recesses of my cottage, in homespun bedsheets and soothing baths drawn at midnight. What those in the village do not understand is that my cottage is as much a living thing as the hare in my garden. When I exhale in ecstasy, the ancient rafters and soft beams of my bed creak with me. And on rare occasions, when the moon is full or that primal urge rises from deep within, my home provides a little extra magic in a well-formed broom handle or a certain vegetable from my garden.

For some, my existence is an abomination—something to be eradicated, lest other women go seeking liberation for themselves. For others, I am a tragedy—a lone woman perennially without a male companion, doomed to spend eternity alone. Despite my apparent damnation, I answer to no one, heed no whims but my own, and if damnation is the cost of freedom, it is a price I am more than willing to pay.

I should have known, however, that this was not an answer the village would accept.

## THE WITCH'S HOUSE

BY ALEXANDRIA BAKER

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# An Artist & A Writer



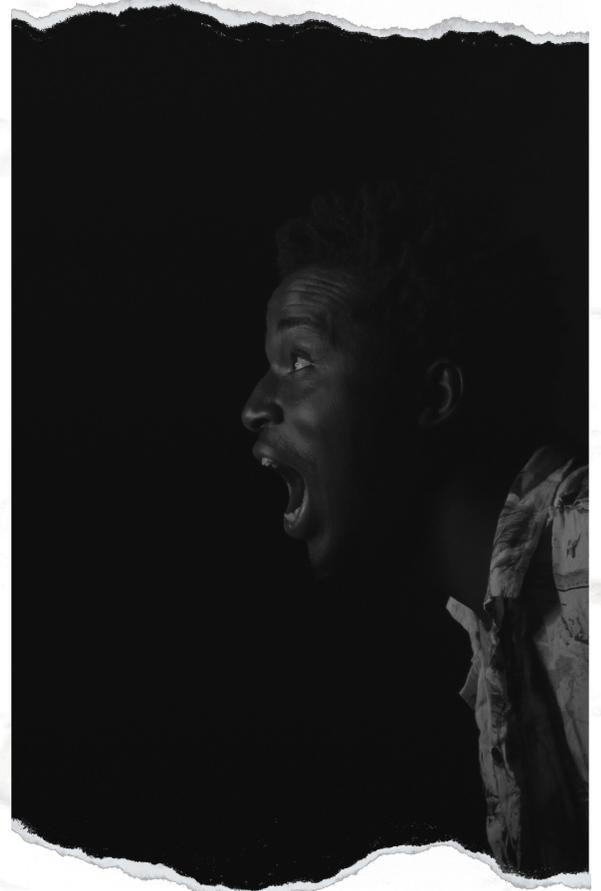
**WRITTEN BY  
CAT VOLEUR**

“You know I’m always going to support you, no matter what.”

That was always the hypothetical situation with Nate, and it probably always would be. He liked to talk about some mystical date in the future when he would be successful, and the money would be pouring in. He liked to describe this fantasy often, in the context that it would happen, probably because he realized it never would.

Nate was a hack.

It wasn’t the day-dreaming itself that bothered Greg. All artists had a certain level of disconnect from reality; he knew he was guilty of it himself. It was the fact that in this portrait being painted of the future, his role never changed. Sometimes Nate did collaborations with authors whom he spent nights pontificating about. Often, his rants were accompanied by the story of how his sole publication was picked up by a publisher for another three installations. How it had been adapted



**“Greg had endured these ramblings for years, and he was never the star in these fantasies, not even a co-star.”**

into an original series for their preferred streaming site that he himself directed and cameoed in for his fictional, adoring public. But the stories always ended the same way—with him supporting Greg.

“Sure you will.”

Greg had endured these ramblings for years, and he was never the star in these fantasies, not even a co-star. They were never equals. Nate preferred him as a prop. “I mean it. I’m going to take care of you,” he would say. Nate spent so much time thinking about that future, he didn’t even realize Greg had been the one taking care of him for years.

“I know you would.”

“I will,” Nate insisted. “This is going to happen.”

“Sure.” Greg fell back to monosyllabic replies. It was easier to tune out these discussions than to engage.

Nate was not assuaged. “Oh, so you don’t believe in me now?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. I can see it in your face. You don’t think that this project is going to happen. You don’t think I’m going to make any money off this.” Nate’s wounded tone begged to be soothed. The two men had been to this point before, but never further.

“I think you have to finish the book first.”

It had slipped out, and now the tension was palpable between the lovers. Greg’s situation had worsened considerably, but his chest felt lighter, even as his partner looked at him with the eyes of an animal that had only known imagined pain. “Wow.”

“Look, Nate—”

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to write a novel?”

“I’ve written novels, Nate.”

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to publish one, then? No, you don’t. Making money in this business isn’t easy. It’s 99% networking—that’s why you don’t have your name on the shelves.”

“Your name isn’t on the shelves, either!” Greg was losing control of the situation, but he couldn’t stop. “You wrote one e-book seven years ago, and you’ve been talking about it ever since.”

“I have written plenty of other things since then, Greg! Which you would know if you ever paid attention to my work.”

“You’ve started two novels since then, and one short story that overstayed its welcome by about four thousand words. That’s not enough content for so much time—even if you had finished one of them. I could list off every stage of every draft of every project you’ve considered since we’ve been together, because I have to hear about it for hours every time you manage to cough up a couple hundred words. I have to pay attention to it because it’s all you talk about.”

It felt so good to say it out loud. The words carried momentum, and the knowledge that their life would never slide back into what it had been.

Nathan clearly felt the shift as well, because he fell out of his victim routine. Perhaps for the first time since they’d known each other. His injured outer layer was peeled back to reveal something nasty and real that Greg had only caught glimpses of before. “Well, forgive me for wanting to do work I’m actually proud of.”

It was a low blow calling him out for the contract work that had been paying both their bills. When they first started dating, Greg had been the sort of man who would never stoop that low in a fight. Then again, when they started dating, he thought he was in love with another writer. The insult fell from his lips before he could reconsider. “I’d rather be a sell out than a prideful creator with no creation.”

“How. Dare. You.” Nate snarled.

“That’s really the heart of the problem, isn’t it? You have no work. You have no ideas.”

“I have ideas!”

“The same ideas! The same three fucking ideas for your entire career—if we can even call it that.”

“Stop it!”

“No! I’ve been coddling your ego for too long. I’m tired of hearing about what a genius you are every goddamned day and reading the same unfinished story over and over every time you change some punctuation. I can’t do it anymore.”

“You won’t leave me.”

“I’ll do one worse. I’ll tell you the truth. You’re the sort of writer who likes talking about his work more than he likes working on it, and the only market that sells to is the campus kids down the street who are as pretentious as you.”

Honesty felt so good for Greg.

The stabbing felt even better for Nate.



The knife was in his lover before Nate even knew what was happening. Right through the heart. It had been sitting right on the table where he had eaten alone for so many nights because Greg had to work late. It hadn't been cleaned up yet because Greg was too tired to ever help out around the house, let alone go to events or have a real conversation. Nate's boyfriend, who had always been afraid to open up, was now spilling his guts all over their hardwood floors.

The irony of that struck Nate as incredibly poetic. As he let the body fall to the floor, he tried to describe the sentiment in his head, to imagine how he might put it on paper. The words evaded him. He couldn't think of any that could truly capture the beauty of it all. It was something he never could have imagined, a tragedy for the ages all bundled up in warm euphoria. His metaphors kept mixing, and even in the thrill of the moment, the imagery was hard for him to hold onto. He ached with the potential of the scene before him, and all he wanted in the world was to preserve the elation before his inspiration withered away.

Taking a moment to wipe his hands on his jeans, he retrieved his computer and sat down next to the carnage. He had the word processor up in seconds, but still, the story wouldn't come to him. Not even in what he considered to be his finest moment. An abyss of white stared back at him, and they continued the stand-off, until his vision was blurry and his brain hurt. Greg stopped twitching by then.

"I told you, you're not a real writer."

Nathan tried to block out the voice of the corpse at his feet, taunting him, as it had in life.

"You're never going to see your name in print. You can't write a single word."

"Shut up!"

"Why don't you tell me about the story you want to write, now that I'm truly a captive audience?"

"You don't deserve to hear it." Nate spat.

"You have nothing."

"I have everything I need."

"You're not a writer."

He looked down at the body, half-expecting to see it sneering as it challenged him, cackling with victory over his life and sanity alike. None of that was true, of course. Greg was just dead.

"You're not a writer," Nate repeated. This time, he was saying it to himself.

It was the biggest breakthrough of his career. *He wasn't a writer after all.* Maybe he never had been. He closed his laptop with a grin, feeling relief wash over him as he realized he'd never have to struggle with word count again.

There would be no more query letters, no more rejections, no more feeling inadequate, and no more trying to fool himself into believing he was something he wasn't. He wasn't a writer; he was an artist. He was a visionary, a prodigy, someone who had created a masterpiece their first time around.

The last seven years hadn't been a waste. They'd pushed him to the point of brilliance and now that he'd found his calling, he could finally claim the success he knew he'd been destined for. He stood up, a new man.

For the first time since his publication he could go to bed and rest easy, knowing it had been a fulfilling day. He looked down at the floor one last time, and relished in the pride he felt for his new creation.



# Cat Voleur



Cat Voleur is a writer of dark, speculative fiction and co-host of the Slasher Radio podcast. Her day job consists of script writing for ever-growing YouTube channels focused on media breakdowns.

She currently resides in a house with her army of rescue felines. In addition to her writing, she can often be found reading, gaming, or pursuing her passion of fictional languages.

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A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

The more I try to focus on the moment, the more the sensations seem to blur together. At the very same time, I curse myself for drinking so much, wishing I had a clear head with which to experience this, but knowing that if I wasn't half in the bag, I never would have acted on this in the first place.

It is surreal in a way I'd only experienced in dreams, where nonsense makes perfect sense until you wake. Somehow, we are having the deepest conversation I've ever had and making love in a way so passionate that it erases my sordid sexual experiences entirely, as though I were a virgin once more.

I move on instinct alone, my limited experience having been mostly with young women who took pity on me, and those stolen moments had been over just as quickly due to shame, self-hatred, and my own innate disinterest.

This is entirely something else.

I feel every kiss, caress, and thrust, and the heat beneath my skin mingles with his; our very own bonfire of flesh and passion.

**INBETWIXT**  
**BY DAN DOLAN**

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# Every King Deserves a Finger



**WRITTEN BY  
STEPHEN BLACK**

The day she left me, I took to my bed. The following day, I took to my work.

She had set the engagement ring on my kitchen table before walking out the door, with not a backward glance. A rich courtesan had turned her head, sweeping my love off her dainty feet the day he swaggered into the inn, he and his friends in search of wine and women. Before the night was over, she was enamoured and I was but an afterthought. What hope had a humble jeweller against a man who dined with the high and mighty? I was cast aside like the ring I had toiled over for months.

For what is a ring without a finger? What is a man without his only love? I had nothing left but my work, so that is what I did, labouring away in my workshop day after day, long after the other shops in the village had closed and their owners trudged home through the winter snow to a warm hearth and loving family. I had no such delights to tempt me home. An only child and orphaned early, I was



**"It had been forged in  
anger and grief,  
infused with a jealous  
rage that still  
simmered beneath my  
reserved veneer."**

brought up by the local nuns, kindly women who took me in and raised me well. They taught me of their God and his son who bled out on a Cross for me. This comforted me, eased the pangs of loneliness.

Until I first laid eyes on her.

It was love at first sight—well, on my part anyway. My desire for her overcame any natural shyness and I threw caution to the wind, courting her with an intensity and fervour that, prior to then, I had confined to my trade. She was aloof at first, but eventually I wore her defences down. I was hardly dashing and lacked the wit and eloquence of others, but I offered stability and a kind heart that would treat her like a queen until the end of my days. Even then, when I proposed and offered her the ring that I had crafted, I was surprised when she accepted. She had many suitors and I imagined myself at the back of the queue. That said, I was the happiest man in the land and immediately began to plan for our wedding day.

It would have been the greatest day of our lives. Had she turned up. I stood for over an hour in my best Sunday attire, as the parish priest vainly attempted to ease my growing despair.

When it became apparent that she was not coming, I returned broken-hearted to my workshop, where I found solace in a bottle. No note nor explanation. Nothing. It was only later that I learnt of her new beau. The entire village knew before me. I was a laughing stock, and contemplated retiring to my office with my pistol and a glass of brandy. It was the honourable thing to do as how could I face my fellow villagers after what transpired? How could I face *her*?

The answer came to me as I lay in bed that night, staring out at the snow skating across a sky so brightly lit by the winter moon, it could have been noon. The snow drifted lazily through the lunar shafts, illuminating an idea that was as simple as it was brilliant.

I slept well, my anguish and dismay evaporated by a new resolve that gripped me with a steely intent.

The villagers saw little of me after that day. Most left me to my own devices, believing that I had retired from public life, unable to face the world after my humiliation at the altar. A few kindly folk left provisions at my door, but I had little need for them as I worked around the clock with a feverish intensity. My hands crafted as they never had before, my brain ablaze with ideas and an energy quite unprecedented. I was inspired, needing neither food nor drink as the workshop candles burned long into the night. I sweated over my bench, as the snow continued

to fall, heavier than ever, drifting against the doors and windows around the village. The water froze in the fountain, Mother Nature's icy architecture an antithetical contrast to the fiery creation taking shape behind my doors.

The snow fell for weeks, cutting off the village from the outside world. We were forced to rely on our own resources and await the spring thaw. Life continued and, eventually, I opened the door to my curious neighbours. Most called to offer their condolences regarding the sudden end to my proposed nuptials and enquire after my well-being.

Once in the workshop, however, they were astounded by the sparkling array of wares in my display cabinets. A selection of necklaces, bracelets, and rings of the highest workmanship. Emeralds, rubies, and sapphires the likes of which they had never seen. My coffers were full by the end of the day as every gentleman in town purchased gifts for their wives and daughters, not wanting to be outdone by friends and colleagues.

All but one.

My forsaken love and her new beau declined to cross my door, their pride preventing them from purveying my glistening shelves. It was an uncommonly bitter winter, however, and the snow showed no sign of receding. I was the only jeweller in the village and their own wedding day drew ever nearer. It was only a matter of time and I was a patient man. That's what heartache does, its scars take a lifetime to heal and there is nothing we can do but wait.

When the morning eventually came, they breezed into my workshop as if nothing had happened. She brazenly stared me in the eye, bedecked in expensive velvet and furs, while he surveyed my cabinets with bored disdain.

When she set eyes on it, however, her icy demeanour melted away; white polished gold set with the purest, grandest diamond she had ever set eyes upon. A million miles from the paltry offering I had placed on her finger all those months ago.

"Oh, Bernard, it's exquisite. I must have it."

"For you, my sweetheart, anything. Have it boxed up immediately, man. I take it a banker's draft will suffice?"

I bowed my head meekly and removed my greatest masterpiece from the cabinet. It had been forged in anger and grief, infused with a jealous rage that still simmered beneath my reserved veneer. "Yes sir, of course. Will that be everything?"

I watched from my workshop on their wedding day, their carriage crossing the square and pulling up outside the chapel, the lord and lady of the manor, preening

before their adoring public. Her hair was immaculate, dress and shoes the finest money could buy, but it was my ring that had onlookers gasping. It glistened with mesmeric effect, all eyes drawn to the finger on which it perched. The finger where my own, more modest band should have been.

The reception went on long into the night. I must admit I thought the guests would never leave as I shivered outside, concealed within the shadows. Carriage after carriage pulled up outside their palatial residence, collecting inebriated guests and whisking them off into the chilly night. At last, a quiet fell upon the mansion as lights were extinguished and the household retired. I allowed the newlyweds some time for I was not a vindictive man. Who was I to disturb the first flush of passion on the night of their betrothal?

The first scream was my cue to venture from the foliage. Drowsy voices and sporadically lit candles pre-empted the front door being flung open and several members of staff exiting at considerable speed. Their faces were contorted in disgust and fear, a certain sign that my plan was proceeding as intended. I took the front steps two at a time, such was my anticipation. Had my months of planning come to fruition? Or would my rotten fortune continue and my hopes be dashed just as my love had dashed them the day she abandoned me?

I need not have worried.

Upon entering the spacious front hall, I was reassured by the sight of my former fiancée standing bare-foot on the marble tiles. Her normally immaculate hair was unkempt, her white nightgown blemished by flecks of blood. In one hand she held a wicked hunting knife, no doubt the property of her newly betrothed. And in her other, she held his severed head, which sported a most perplexed countenance. The new lady of the house looked at me, dazed, likely unsure as to how the events of her wedding night had taken such a downward trajectory.

“Gerard?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Wh-what are you doing here? What’s happening?”

I smiled at her innocence. This was my beloved, before greed and ambition corrupted her pure soul. I stepped towards her, easing the decapitated head from her grasp, and allowing it to fall to the floor with a satisfying squelch. “Do not worry, my love, everything is in hand. I see you’re still wearing the wedding ring I made. Can I just say that it looks exquisite on your hand. You must have looked divine at the altar.”

“I...I don’t know. I can’t remember much. Where is Bernard?” She frantically scanned the hall as I discreetly nudged the severed remains of her husband out of the way with my boot.

“You need not worry, dear girl, you will be seeing him soon enough. Now, go ahead, you know what must be done next.”

She looked down at the bloody knife with a mournful frown, before returning my gaze. She really was the most beautiful woman I had ever set eyes upon. “I don’t know if I can.”

“I assure you, Marianne, that you can. Then you and your beloved Bernard can be together again. Forever.” I nodded reassuringly and watched as she held the knife across her wrist and—tentatively at first, but then with increased fervour—began to cut.

She didn’t scream until the blade found bone.



The chapel was quiet, which I appreciated after all the drama of the evening. The snow continued to fall beyond the stained-glass windows, casting dappled shadows across the candlelit pews. I knelt before the altar, gathering my thoughts as the greatest moment of my life beckoned. I stood, straightened my cravat, and reached for her hand, removing the garish band that besmirched this otherwise perfect appendage.

I placed her hand gently on the altar, reaching into my trouser pocket to remove the more modest offering that had originally graced her elegant digit. Unassuming, but infinitely more graceful than the tacky display of opulent wealth I had crafted for the now not-so-happy couple. A ring I had filled to the brim with every ounce of the anger and hatred she had unleashed in me. An anger that had driven her to commit the most despicable murder, in addition to...

The hand of my one true love was no longer attached to a wrist, her body lying cold and lifeless on the tiled floor where I had left it. Now, as I prepared to return the original band to its rightful place, I smiled in relief, oblivious to the sharp shrill of the constabulary whistles outside, my grievous handiwork discovered.

I did not care. My work was done. Flesh and metal were reunited as I slipped the ring onto her cold, dead flesh.

For every ring deserves a finger.

# Stephen Black



Stephen Black is a blogger and fantasy writer from Northern Ireland. He lives in the rolling countryside outside Belfast where he thinks dark thoughts and writes darker tales. He is married with three hatchlings.

*Promise Me This*—as seen in the third issue of *The Crow's Quill*—is his first dalliance with gothic horror... but it won't be his last. His Rapunzel retelling, *Where Shadows Fall*, was published in the anthology, *Grimm & Dread*.

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A SNEAK PEEK AT



# EROS & THANATOS



## AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEATH & DESIRE

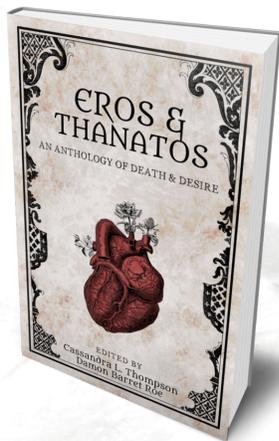
“Yes, this shadow figure. It comes to me in blackened dreams, pulling me down with it into a deep abyss with phantom hands. It started in the corner of my room, three months I think, after Beatrix went missing. It lies in wait for me, glistening teeth gleaming in the dark, inching closer to my bed each time I try to find relief by shutting my eyes. Just yesterday, it remained hovering over my knees watching the screams lock in my throat until they turned to gasps. It smiled at my fright, then vanished.” She stands, pacing nervously and wringing her hands. “I go for a walk in the woods to clear my mind afterwards. Nature, the trees, the grass beneath my feet, they always seem to soothe the...the demon.” She laughs. “Well, that’s what mother calls it. I’m not so sure of what it is. Beatrix’s disappearance put a fear in me I am unable to escape from, I assume, or she is haunting me, who knows.”

He pulls a small notebook from his breast pocket, scribbles some notes, and replies with a smile, “Well yes, mourning the loss of a friend can have some quite undesirable side effects, particularly one with such a troubled past. I have faith my treatment will cure you of these spectres. I’d like to invite you to stay at the hospital for a fortnight. You will be directly under my care, and I promise you will have the freedom to roam the grounds, just as Vedoma did, respecting treatment conditions, of course.”

**LISSANDRA**  
**BY A.L. GARCIA**

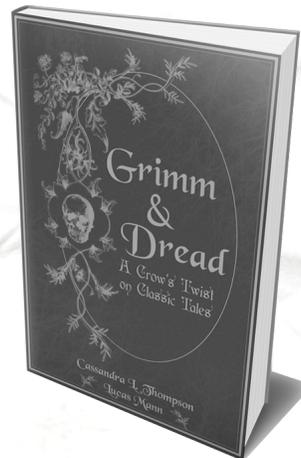
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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are so grateful for the stories written by our talented authors, and we hope you enjoyed the poetry contributed by two of our House's poets. Thank you, Crow family, for your continued enthusiasm and support!

A deep thank you to everyone who submitted a story. It is truly special for us when you share your works, regardless of their acceptance. While your story may not have been chosen, next month's theme is *Betrayal* and it could be your chance to spin us a dark tale. If you are interested in seeing your story published in *The Crow's Quill*, please check our website for more details. We'd be honored to have a look.

Are you a poet?

Participate in our daily poetry prompts and use #PoetryIsNotDead for a chance to be featured! We want to shine a light on more dark poets. Keep calling and we Crows may answer.

Sincerely, from Quill & Crow's Associate Editors,

*Damon Barrett Roe*

*L.R. Wieland*



# TRIGGER INDEX

- **Disfigurement**

mentioned ◆—————◆ *Porcelain Flesh*

- **Dismemberment**

mentioned ◆—————◆ *Every Ring Deserves a Finger*

- **Homicide**

decapitation

mentioned ◆—————◆ *Every Ring Deserves a Finger*

stabbing/slitting

mentioned ◆—————◆ *Porcelain Flesh*  
*(excerpt) Caulston*  
*An Artist and a Writer*

- **Physical Torture**

mentioned ◆—————◆ *(excerpt) You Again*

- **Sexual Content**

implied ◆—————◆ *(excerpt) The Witch's House*

mentioned ◆—————◆ *(excerpt) Inbetwixt*

- **Suicide**

ideation

implied ◆—————◆ *When It Rains*



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