

The Crow's Quill

APRIL 2022

REBIRTH & RENEWAL

TALES OF DARK DELIGHT

Embrace this time of renewal by delving into five macabre stories about rebirth, growth, and change. Read about isolation and deals with Death, the afterlife, and grim sacrifices.

Poetry Interludes

Explore the theme of betrayal in two poems by talented members of the Crow community.

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.

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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.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Dearest dark hearts,

Spring has come.

Personally, I thrive in the cold and dreary winter, but I can't deny that this time of transition brings with it a lot of inspiration. Across cultures, the natural change from barren and unforgiving to thriving and tenacious is celebrated, revered even, and all things look hopeful.

But here, in the Gothic fiction world, it's an opportunity to twist the brightness into something insidious. It's an opportunity to toe the line between life and death, and delve into the purgatory between.

We've collected five works that do just that and we couldn't be prouder to share them with you. Enjoy these dark tales about rebirth and renewal, and revel in their hope and dread as you see fit.

After all, you can't have hope without despair, or life without death.

Yours,

Damon Barret Roe

Damon Barret Roe

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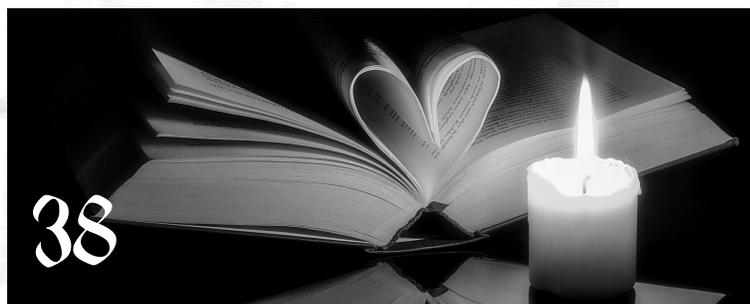
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A comprehensive list of any and all content that may be disturbing to some of our cherished readers.



THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



For the Roses



WRITTEN BY
JP RELPH

It was a perfectly average September morning until Nigel found the dead girl.

A brief frost was already melting as we entered the woods, our breaths feathering away into the treetops. The sun made a pale effort to penetrate the branches, only gilding the very edges of leaves, brightening the violets and nightshade. Nigel disappeared ahead, scattering willow warblers; just a curl of pewter among the green and bronze.

I would never have seen her as she was, discarded behind dense shrubbery a little off the boot-made trail, like old tires that were often dumped there. Nigel found her with his marvelous nose. Her scent, meaty and sickly sweet, had pulled him to her, and he barked for me. I navigated the stabbing branches of blackthorn and bramble, expecting to find a dead rabbit or lost item of clothing, only to join my dog in regarding a young woman. Face down on the woodland floor, her cold, brutalized body looked almost rested in a bed of verdant ferns.



"... But for the ecstatic urgency of blowflies; a noisy haze of first responders attending to her."

But for the blood and the bruises.

But for the ecstatic urgency of blowflies; a noisy haze of first responders attending to her.

I held Nigel back from further intrusive sniffing, white-knuckling his collar. Sensing the seriousness of my mood, he whined a little. I was very aware we had already disrupted the fragile veil of a crime scene, that we may have already altered it in some microscopic way. Perhaps a tuft of poodle hair had alighted on the girl in Nigel's haste to see her. My own skin cells breathed into the scene, settling on her unyielding flesh. Still, I couldn't move far enough back that she'd be out of sight. I couldn't leave her unseen. Her presence in this brown place, her pale thighs veined like the ferns that swaddled her—putrefaction's delicate sketching—appalled and fascinated me in equal measure.

I crouched ever closer, the fecundity of earth and rotting detritus masking the worst of the smell. I could see she had rested in this position a while; where flesh grazed woodland floor, lividity stained it dark plum, while the rest of her skin, hard-winter-white, seemed to shriek against the autumnal canvas she'd been crudely painted on. Insects had already corrupted her. Gravid greenbottles hovered anxiously; many had laid their eggs in all the moist and rent-flesh openings. I watched, a little repulsed, as larva roiled in stinking union, spilling from her mouth in their haste to pupate. A dark, fatal red hid much of her face, thickly matted her hair, a loud warning of what lay beneath. Something surely crushed, bludgeoned into new form. Someone had sought to destroy her. I felt a tear slip the confines of my lashes, watched it darken a spot of denim, and bloom a little like blood. My breath hitched.

Incongruous in the grisly tableau, a purple satin ribbon still secured a long plait, implausibly untainted by ichor. It was the spring-bright purple of the crocuses sleeping in my rock garden, the enticing purple of a chocolate wrapper at Christmas, the sacred purple of a priest's stole. It was her bright innocence made indelible. It was agony not to reach across the ferns and take the ribbon from her ruined hair. Maybe I could take something of the youth and perfection she had known—before it was turned to laceration and contusion. Maybe it could bring me closer to who she had been, when she was loved.

Nigel barked at that moment, at my straining fingers, pulling me back. I patted his noble head, regained my senses, and reached for my phone.



Later, I watched the intimate, inert scene I had been privy to be obliterated. Soon after I'd made my call—calm and informative—the woods were grubby with the puzzle-solvers. Like the eager blowflies, they buzzed in and out of the tent to feast. Uniformed officers like stern, robust yellowjackets stood sentinel, arms crossed over muscular vests. I could picture the papery white suits inside, hunched over the body like pale truffle hogs. They would scrape and tweeze the girl and her earthen bed for treasures, part her clotted hair with their blue hands. An intimacy usually afforded a lover.

I stood on the periphery of the controlled chaos, behind tape that cracked in the breeze between trees. I was now 'that woman who found the body.' A detective in a creased polyester suit, his eyes sadly apathetic, asked me questions. My statement had already been given to one of the painfully young PCs, so I had little to add to stir his investigative juices. Cowed like a swaybacked workhorse, he plodded back to the tent in worn shoes. As the racket of rubberneckers and impatient reporters—spilling over each other like ravenous maggots—grew intolerable, Nigel and I took our leave. The taint of the girl lingered on my skin and in his fur. We would both need a hot bath.

We would take her home with us.



In the days that followed, the news was steeped in almost gleeful reporting of the girl's demise and discovery. In front of a crackling fire, Nigel and I watched as the girl was identified, her life ripped open as her skull had been, to appease the clamoring curiosity of the grimy public. Photos were shown of a smiling, laughing, luminous blonde so far removed from her final image. The one left by the killer for me to see. The one my phone had captured before I retreated to the edge of the woods to await the sirens. Her eyes in the glossy, TV images were campanula-blue; intense but naïve. They had been hidden from me in the woods, and I found I was glad for that. Glad not to have seen the milk-filmed adulteration of that radiant color.

In one standout photo, taken as she was turning towards the camera, her hair fanned out from a high ponytail. At her crown, a purple ribbon tied in a bow, its tails frozen in flight. My breath snagged in my chest at the sight of it. I touched my fingers to the screen, but there was only static.

Her name was, always will be, Emily. She was studying to be a teacher. She loved horses and snorkeling in Greece. She was an only child and, therefore, exceptionally precious. She was loved by everyone, terribly missed, kind and intelligent and with her whole life ahead of her.

Until.



I dreamt of Emily that night, as I had hoped to. Carefree and vibrant, she darted barefoot through the woods, her daffodil-yellow dress flitting amongst black trees. Her butterscotch-blond hair, in an impossibly long plait, swished and swatted like a horse's tail, discouraging the sparrow-sized emerald flies that stalked her. The plait enticed me to chase it. She enticed me. I ran through brambles and ferns, desperate to snatch the purple ribbon dancing in the saturated autumn landscape like a royal butterfly. I reached for her, the yellow dress waltzing, the rope of hair whipping, felt the shiver of satin against my fingers. She started to turn, as in the TV photo, and my vision was filled with her brutalisation. The ribbon slipped from my fingers and she vanished in a silent scream. I woke with a cavern of loss in my chest and the woodland faint in my nostrils.



Nigel and I followed the case as it unfolded, albeit buffed and polished by the media. In the end, it took only six days to apprehend her killer. A moronic individual, some pathetic stalker-type, he had left too much of himself in the woods, on the girl. The thought of him staining her with his fetid seed disgusted me. His gluttony repulsed me. His idiocy infuriated me. The amateurish deposition choice, alluding to desperation and panic, offended me.

There is nothing novel or artistic about leaving a body to rot in the woods. Left exposed as she was, mere meters from a well-trodden path, ensured her eventual discovery. Combined with a lack of forensic knowledge and abject stupidity, her destroyer was guaranteed to be unraveled from the evidence collected.

I would have burned the body to ash. It requires a fairly tremendous heat but my neighbors are familiar with my occasional bonfires, they often add their own garden waste to the piles of branches and leaves. I would have buried the resultant cold ashes and unburned bone fragments deep in the fertile soil of my rose garden. Days later, I would have planted a new rose on top—an ostentatious floribunda. Purple maybe.

My rose garden is full to bursting, often resplendent with blousy, intensely fragrant blooms due to the enriched earth. I like to cut a few choice stems from the tea roses for the vase in my hallway, welcoming any visitors with their vintage perfume. Later in the year, I pick the fat seedpods and make rosehip tea, enjoyed by guests with my homemade gingerbread.

Of course, I would never have killed Emily in the first place. Stolen her campanula-blue innocence, ruined her gentle face, soiled her young body. It is such a wretched and ghastly act.

I only take men for the roses. I'm not a monster.



JP Relph



JP Relph is a working-class writer from North West England. Her writing journey began in 2021 and is mostly hindered by four cats, and aided by copious tea.

A forensic science degree and a passion for microbes, insects and botany motivate her words—which can be found in *The Fantastic Other*, *Sledgehammer*, *Splonk*, *Noctivagant Press*, *Full House Literary* and others.

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THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Transfiguration Day



WRITTEN BY
A. ALISTAIR KVERN

I'm awakened by the singing, and that's how I know. Every year, someone must be chosen, and every year, the chosen one is summoned to the temple by singing only they can hear. It's beautiful. It's exhilarating.

I'm terrified.

I roll out of bed and onto the floor in almost a crouch, flicking open the curtains of the single small window in my room. Even that quick look is enough to tell me what I already know: the townsfolk are already beginning to gather around my house. Even if they can't hear the singing, somehow the priest always knows. I recognize a face here and there—a friend, a fellow farmer—but most are unrecognizable behind heirloom masks or scarves tied around faces. It's easier, being anonymous. One of the small crowd, a man in a half-mask carved like a crow, sees me before I can duck back down.

"She's awake!" he cries. I recognize his voice. Marcel, a fisherman. We've shared a drink before, after long days plying our trades out in the hot sun.



"I should be terrified, but there is something unexpected instead: anticipation."

I duck back under the window frame, but it's futile. I can hear the singing—sweet music pouring from invisible throats and intensifying as the first blows begin to ring against my door. Some of us go willingly, easily. Most of us don't.

I look around my small room. A simple chair sits next to a simple desk, with only a few papers scattered across it. Small ceramic figurines of my family look down at me from atop my dresser, their expressions unreadable. I get to my feet and run my fingers over the flowers carved on my dresser—a gift from my father—before pulling on a tunic and trousers. I buckle my belt, check that my knife still hangs at my hip, and close my eyes for a moment to pray.

The singing is achingly beautiful. The beating against my door is like a drumbeat behind it, perfectly in time.

My door bursts open.

There's no point hiding, so I don't try. I wait for them in the doorway to my room, hand on the hilt of my knife.

There's at least a dozen of them crowding into my kitchen and, at the head of them, is Marcel. He holds his hands out to me, placating. "Don't do this, Renée," he says, quietly. "Come gently."

I let him approach me, close enough to touch, before lashing out with my knife. It's a good knife, and I keep it clean and well-sharpened. It opens his cheek down to the bone. He falls back, clutching his face and screaming. The song is triumphant around me, urging me onwards.

I cut at least four more before they finally wrestle the knife from my hand, hold me by the shoulders, and drag me out into the street.

I struggle. Of course I do—it's instinct, even with two strong men holding me by the arms and five times as many waiting to take up the slack should they falter. The gravel scrapes against my skin as they drag me down the road, and I know that I'm going to leave a bloody trail before they get me to the temple. Good. Let them have that reminder of what they've done. I don't scream, though. I don't give them that.

The sun is still warm, even a few weeks into autumn, and I can taste the last of the summer flowers on the dusty air. It feels almost like a parade, with people lining the sides of the road, following our progress towards the town's center, but there is no cheering. I remember being part of that crowd, in years past—remember watching as some marched with their heads held high, and others were dragged like me.

My brother was dragged. I didn't stop them, just watched, with a child's wide-eyed wonder. In my place, I wonder if he would have done the same.

A. Alistair Kvern



A. Alistair Kvern is a Canadian writer and librarian living on unceded land. They love sci-fi, fantasy, and horror in all its forms. When not writing, they can be found reading, walking their dog, or contemplating the ocean.

Transfiguration Day is their first published story.

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A CROW'S

POETRY INTERLUDE



THAW

it's there,
it's never not there—

g r i e f

sitting in shavings of your face
caked on tar-like gaze,
a false god glistens
spiteful, elemental scammer
bend a knee and

m o u r n

what never came to be,
days of torn muscles and growthful nights
no, reckless spiral staircases
pleading with demons for a glimmer, a gleam,
a decadent taste of cream brûlée

l o v e

came in destructive catatonic binges
and men with keen eyes for facial recognition,
late night browser history
you see, you see
it's all make believe

f o r g i v e n e s s

isn't key shaped, it's a shovel
dirty blistering hands
and the guts to stare into pooling puddles,
confront the brutal decomposition
welcome the thaw, root down and

r e v i v e

MARIE CASEY

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



DODEN



WRITTEN BY
KAITLIN OSTER

I looked over my land one early July morning while my children ran between rows of vegetables, ready for harvest. I inhaled the cool Tuscan air and admired my land, as I did each morning. I thanked the gods for my family—and for my loyal mule, of course. I thanked Gaia for the bounty.

I thanked every being I owed, which is why I did not recognize the mysterious rider who came upon my land. Behind him, gray-black clouds swept over and back down the mountains. Snow fell—or did it roil off the highest rocks? The wind did not blow, and it did not howl; it screamed like a pained mother in the throes of birth. A sound I knew from the miracle of both my son and daughter.

This coming felt like no miracle.

His black horse's hooves echoed and pounded towards my home, like a steady, panicked heartbeat that I could not distinguish from my own. The winds reached me and stole the air from my lungs. He was a lone, cloaked rider, but the hoofbeats



**“I am not the gods,”
Famine said. He
looked beyond me to
my cottage. “Death
will be busy.”**

mimicked an army, and though it was not the coming of war, his presence filled me with dread. The backdrop of our mountain village amplified the sounds, frightening my children. They froze amid our rows of vegetables, their gazes on the dark figure. I called out to them but they did not hear—or could not, for the very same wind that stole my breath took my words and dragged them away. I stumbled to the children as the rider drew near at impossible speeds. I couldn't tell if the rider and horse floated over the land, if the hoofbeats were mere trickery, for he did not waiver.

Nonetheless, I rushed to my children and grabbed one in each arm. They squealed in fear before realizing they were in their father's protective embrace. I stumbled again in the muddy field. I looked down and saw frost on the harvest, my vegetables wilting before my eyes. Dead. This was no act of man. I shook off the thought and ran as hard as I could from the rider, pursued by snow and the warlike pounding of what could only be a demon's hooves against my own panicked heart.

I thrust my children into my wife's arms. She looked at me with a grieved, pale face as our babies wept in fear, as though they knew who rode down the hill. I didn't know how to comfort them.

"He brings frost and snow," my wife said. "He will bring death. Why, my love? What did we do?"

"I will ask," I replied.

My wife pleaded for me to stay, to barricade the doors and huddle around the fire, but I couldn't. I stood over my family as they cowered on the floor and noticed how deathly still the world had become. The hoofbeats had stopped. Small, short, frightened breaths and whimpers rose to my ears, sounds I hadn't heard since my children were born. I picked up my scythe for protection and looked beyond the open door, where the rider waited at the edge of my property. With one hard swallow, I instructed my wife to secure the door behind me, exited my home, and marched across my frost-covered field in the biting July cold.

The rider's horse stood like a statue, but breathed heavily out of its nostrils, trails of mist snaking and coiling into the sky. I smelled its decay. It seemed unaware of its exposed ribcage under the boots of the rider. I stared in horror, in a waking nightmare, to see a creature ridden to death like that. When I got closer, I saw a man—not quite a man—gaunt, sickly looking. He lowered his hood and straightened his spine. It creaked and cracked as the crown of his head stretched towards the ever-darkening sky. He lifted a hand holding one of my tomatoes, rotten, as though it had been in the sun for days. With gnarled, yellow teeth, he bit into it. The sound

curdled my stomach, but I still stepped forward. “Rider,” I asked, “what are you? Have you brought this weather?” I gestured to the sky and down to my ruined crop.

“What,” he growled, “what am I...? What an appropriate question.” He grinned wide and abnormal, the corners of his mouth peeled back in his taut sinew face and revealed his rotten molars.

I backed away. Was this some kind of demon, ready to pull me from the mortal plane to an underworld of eternal horror? Surely a horrible place, I thought, because his features were not of a gentle spirit.

The creature leaned down, bending at his waist, and looked me in the eyes. “I am Famine,” he said. His voice cut the air, heavy and thick. My skin crawled and my spine chilled. A Horseman of the End Times.

“Forgive my boldness, Horseman. I didn’t know it was you. Is this the Apocalypse?” I felt an urge to show respect crawl through me; he was no demon, but a weapon of powers I have worshiped.

“No,” he said, “I am angry at Death.” Famine took another bite of the rotten tomato with grand intention, as if to tease me. He inspected the rest of it, frowned, and tossed it to the ground. The tomato shriveled up and blackened before my eyes, returning to the soil.

“What does your anger with Death have to do with us? With my family? I thank the gods everyday for my gifts. I pray everyday!” My hands trembled with fear to speak in such a manner, but I thought only of my wife and children in our warm little cottage, desperate for me to save them.

“I am not the gods,” Famine said. He looked beyond me to my cottage. “Death will be busy.”

Famine turned his horse and rode away, a thousand hoofbeats following. I stood at the edge of my ruined crops and looked up at the sky. Snow gently fell, a peaceful summer snow. I fell to my knees among the rot, doubled over in sadness and fear as I watched the Horseman ride into town. The muffled screams of horrified villagers shortly followed and mingled with the howling wind.



The mule died first. She was loyal and hard working, but we needed to eat. My family sat sullen and sunken-eyed around our small table while we plucked at her meat with bony, cold fingers. The famine lasted months; summer’s winter turned to autumn’s winter, then true winter. Our wood burned out faster than normal, and my

wife wept as we burned the last of the furniture, a wedding gift her father had made. Eventually we ran out of mule meat.

My wife and I had eaten less than our children, but the winter sickness gripped them both. First, my son developed a cough, whooping and wheezing. It consumed the air of our dark little cottage. Eventually, and inevitably, the sickness caught my daughter. It took her by the throat. She tried to drink water but couldn't, tried to eat porridge but the pain was too great. I sat beside them, each delirious from fever, and begged them to hold on as my beloved wife wept.

I prayed for help and thought an answer would come when my wife called out to me, "Hoofbeats! Maybe a doctor!"

"What color is the horse?" I stood, suspicious, untrusting of horseback riders from the mountain.

"White? Pale-colored," she said.

I exited my home and waited for the individual to approach, and told my wife to tend to our children. The rider in white stopped before me. He leapt from his horse and I froze in the door. His scythe gleaned in the moonlight. He was no doctor.

"Death," I breathed, "I pray of you, I beg of you. Do not take my children. Take me!" I tried to reach for his robes, ready to battle the Horseman, but he did not try to pass me. He did not fight.

Instead, he placed a delicate hand on my forearm. "But you are healthy," a calm voice replied. It was not a deep, piercing voice like Famine's. It soothed me in some way. Death lowered his hood.

"You're a woman," I gasped.

"No, I am Death," Death said. "I must apologize for Famine, but do not fear. I will end their suffering."

"Please," I whimpered.

"Do you love them?"

"More than anything."

"Then let me end their pain."

Death walked past me into the house. I froze. I wanted to scream, but no one could beat Death. I stood outside, watching the shadows of winter clouds pass over the mountains as tears trailed down my cheeks, and waited for the Horseman. I heard my wife scream, but could not turn around.

My son died first, then my daughter.

Kaitlin Oster



Kaitlin Oster is a New York-based writer with a Bachelor's in English from Bridgewater State University, and she completed her undergraduate degree requirements with Oxford University. Currently, Kaitlin is enrolled in the low-residency David Lynch MFA program for screenwriting with Maharishi International University.

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A CROW'S

POETRY INTERLUDE



UNDEAD LOVE

A melancholy rain
pours atop your grave,
while necromancy aims
to raise what here lies slain.

Claw through mud and pain,
devour then my brain;
regenerate the same —
our undead love remains.

TRES K.

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Where the Wind Dies



WRITTEN BY
BECCA LEE

At first, my solitude was a choice.

Until it wasn't, and isolation metastasized throughout my existence until I was thoroughly infected with loneliness. I learned to accept it. I had no other options here.

Here, where I didn't recognize any of my surroundings, although they all felt familiar. Here, which became my home not by choice, but rather by some cynical cosmic design.

Here.

I wasn't always here. There was once a before, but before felt like a dream. Perhaps I merely woke up and never dreamt again. Before felt like forever ago, and it probably was, if it was even real to begin with.

It all began with Death.

I saw Death in passing many times throughout my old life. She was gentle—not at all the soul-ripping reaper many stories made her out to be. In fact, I never



" I watched as the flames swallowed the walls. I smiled as the ashes piled up."

encountered a more sorrowful being than her. Death took care in what she did, looming in corners and waiting patiently as loved ones whispered their goodbyes. She vaporized their consciousnesses and breathed sharply until their bodies became corpses. She inhaled souls like a divine nectar.

Make no mistake, though gentle, she was still cunning. Observant by nature, she recognized me as I recognized her—almost as if I were a friend in passing or an enemy tethered to her own existence. I could sense that others couldn't see her, although she was near-impossible to miss.

Death wore a long black cloak that dragged into infinity. She glided slowly, as if the thick velvet that swaddled her frame was entirely too heavy. Her hood was drawn over her head, so that none could gaze upon her—until, one day, I did.

After she escorted yet another soul into the afterlife, she made her way to me and paused.

“You see me?” Death asked in a voice she didn't speak aloud, but rather made appear in my mind.

“Yes,” I responded, neither fearful nor brave.

“Well, isn't that just interesting?” she breathed.

She pondered for a moment before withdrawing her hood and unveiling the most hauntingly beautiful face I had ever seen. She had charcoal skin with contrasting silver hair that descended in long, pristine ribbons. Her eyelashes curled so long that they touched her bare brow bone, and, when the sunlight trickled down to her skin, she glistened like shimmering snowflakes falling against a night sky. Her eyes were, by far, her most enchanting feature. She had no pupils or irises—just clear quartz eyes—both translucent and smoky white. It was with those eyes that she could both study me in the present while watching over all of creation. She tilted her head, examining me further.

It was then that Death asked me whether I'd like to live forever.

Why, of course! Who wouldn't want to continue living for eternity with a life as extravagant as mine? Death must have known. I had everything: money, fame, respect, love, fear. I lived a life more illustrious than any average person could dream. Their idea of utopia hardly touched what my reality was on a mere, uneventful Tuesday.

There were some unsavory parts, of course. For instance, not trusting anyone—even my own family and friends—the ones closest to me were often the ones who eagerly awaited my failures. The resulting loneliness of it all could be better left

forgotten too. Not to mention the all-consuming darkness that an excess of material items couldn't brighten. The view from the top, you see, was actually quite gloomy. And it was easy to lose your footing and end up watching everything you built come toppling down.

I could do without those parts. But Death didn't bargain, she merely proposed. How could I turn that down? It would be preposterous, right? I wasn't certain.

I hesitated for a moment before disclosing my decision.

Death nodded, smiling at my response. A cursed grin, both alluring and frightening, crept across her face. She slowly lifted her arm and ushered me into her eternal robe.

Everything went dark, as if I had never known light.

The darkness crept over me like tendrils of smoke as I descended further into the void. I clawed at my surroundings, and tried to feel for a wall or any surface with some leverage. Still, I slipped further and further into a vacuum of silence. I opened my mouth to scream but found myself suffocating on air. How could oxygen become so poisonous?

After struggling for what felt like hours, I finally hit the bottom of the pit. I still couldn't see. There was only the endless, wicked dark that had swallowed me and stolen my voice. I stayed there, paralyzed. My eyelids grew heavy not with sleep, but by some unholy hypnosis. Helpless, I fought to remain conscious as my head throbbed, but I eventually gave in.

When I woke up, I found myself here.

Here wasn't anything like there. There, I'd had everything. Here, I didn't even have myself, for my image had changed—my reflection was no longer my own. I was younger now, fourteen or fifteen from the looks of it. A different girl—almond eyes, dark hair, bangs, smooth skin, and a crooked grin.

I had a home here. That was all. The tiny, single-story home positioned on a barren plot of land that stretched over the horizon. The inside of the house was nothing special—just the basics, with low ceilings and long-outdated pastel wallpaper.

The spongy carpet was tearing away from the baseboards. The static fuzz on the television in the corner was stuck on a channel that never changed, the picture was always blurry, and the crackled cheers from some crowd of some game of some sport on the screen was the incessant background noise accompanying my days. It all felt so familiar. It all felt so uneasy.

Like something went wrong here.

Each day, I felt as if I forgot what happened within these walls, but I remembered the fuzz. The static. The quiet cheers. My brain cataloged all my surroundings. I restlessly studied my stagnant environment for any new inconsistency. It felt important, I was sure of it, but it was almost certainly not.

I was stuck.

Stuck with the same television station and the same bowl of cereal. Each day reset, monotonous and mundane. Each morning, I poured those sugary rainbow flakes from that box that never seemed to run out and conducted my meticulous inspection of the unchanging surroundings. Then I sat quietly—sometimes on the floor, other times I opted for the sofa or kitchen table. I listened for any unfamiliar sounds, like the occasional faint ticking from a clock that I still couldn't find. I washed my face and tried to get familiar with my new reflection. I retired to bed where I stared at the wall until I eventually fell asleep. I played along. It was my only option in this place.

I'd have to wait. There was nothing but time here.

Here, where the wind came to die.

I stood upon the barren wasteland outside my home. The earth beneath my feet was scorched and cracked, and I kicked up reddish dust behind my heels with every step. I was the only remaining life here.

There were no trees. No plants. No other houses. No people. There was nothing but land, sky, and this little rectangular house. It all appeared so out of place, yet strategically positioned by whichever force constructed this cruel joke.

Why did the sun even bother to rise and fall?

I stared at the sun as if to curse it, then allowed my gaze to wander to my bizarre little home. I could walk forever in any direction from it, and I had. I walked until my legs collapsed and I fell asleep beneath a starless night, only to find myself back in this peculiar home in the morning. I tried this a few times and always failed. Despite how far I walked or sprinted, I found only land and sky. I always ended up back here, with the box of cereal that never ran out and the television station that never changed.

I grew restless.

And paranoid.

I had to do something drastic—something outrageous and irreversible. So I set fire to my home one evening. It took only a single match. I watched as the flames swallowed the walls. I smiled as the ashes piled up. I chuckled as the residual heat radiated against my cheeks, laughing maniacally as sweat beaded from my pores. The

orange, glowing sight was simply brilliant against the dark canvas in the background. I watched until the whole thing was gone. Then I curled up beside the charred remains and slept soundly for the first time maybe ever.

Still, the following morning, I woke up in the same bed. Like a Phoenix, the house had resurrected itself from the ashes. Only now, there was a small blinking red light coming from a freshly installed smoke detector positioned above me on the ceiling, as if to mock me.

Or to serve as a warning.

I rolled onto my side under my stiff quilt and stared at the ugly wallpaper. I curled into a fetal position and felt burning tears form in the corners of my eyes. I longed for the life I once knew, clinging desperately to any fragmented memories of my previous life as the days melted together.

I was alone.

Who knew how many days had passed? Or how many more days I would remain here? I recited what I could of my old memories, fearful that, if I didn't, I would lose them forever. However, there was one memory I always stumbled on. The clearest memory I possessed had a smudge.

There was a very important piece I couldn't quite recall.

It was about a decision I once made.

You see, Death asked me whether I'd like to live forever.

But I don't remember my answer.



Becca Lee



Becca Lee is an emerging writer. In recent months, she stumbled across her childhood diary where her nine-year-old self stated that she wanted to become a writer when she grew up. Becca is now honoring both her younger and current selves' ambitions by being a writer. Her first short story, *Remember Me*, was featured in *Elegant Literature's* inaugural issue.

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Water Drought



WRITTEN BY
JOELLE M. JONES

I didn't know precisely what it was that drew me to deep waters ever since my early childhood. Other people, such as my father's maid, Alba, had always been afraid of them—of the terrible darkness that lay beneath the surface and threatened to swallow everyone who dared to even sink a finger into it whole. Drowning was a cold and cruel death that turned water, like that of the river that ran through the forest just outside our home, into a mocking reminder of our vulnerability and mortality—of our fragility.

I stepped into a puddle, the cold liquid robbing me of my warmth as I took another step back. I had not meant to disturb my father while he bathed.

He lay still in the tub, facing the window on the opposite side of the room as I wiped the water from my hands. It soaked my nightgown, but that hardly mattered.

With a hand on the door knob, I looked at my father, who lay still—so still, he



"It had been darker than the trees and bushes for certain, as if the night itself had borne and tethered it to its womb."

almost looked like a doll. He was never so peaceful and calm, always raging like the storm outside.

His frame remained unmoving even as I exited the dark room, pulling the door shut behind me. I was not to disturb him, or I would suffer the consequences.

When I turned and saw Alba in the corridor, I faltered. Her eyes were wide, running up and down my body before settling on my face again. She held a silver tray with two cups and one pot in her hands, which were shaking slightly. I heard the porcelain clinking.

“Miss,” she breathed, and I angled my head, confused about her state yet not bothered enough to question it.

“Good evening, Alba.” I took a cup of tea from her, its translucent steam rising to the ceiling and yielding to the pace of my steps as I walked past her down the corridor. Her gaze followed me—I felt it on my back, but I did not turn. The hem of my nightgown brushed the carpet which muffled my steps. Candles at the walls cast shadows on the portraits hanging there, their flames dancing to an inaudible rhythm.

The wallpaper crumbled at certain spots and fell to the floor in dark flakes while a moth flew past me—one of many which the estate housed. When exactly the moths had come, no one knew, but with them came stains and smells of moisture. Perhaps it was the spot the house had been built on, so close to the water.

After descending the stairs, I came to a halt in front of a window and peeked outside at the violent wind that forced the trees to sway. My father’s words snuck through my mind as I recalled his figure in the bathtub. They were always the same suffocating words that forged a new link in my never-ending chains. More reminders that I was not to leave the place, the crumbling house, under any circumstance.

While I sipped my tea, I watched raindrops run down the windows, where they merged with others only to become one at the bottom. Despite my eyelids feeling heavy and the updo my hair had been forced into weighing me down, I had no intentions of resting. Darkness had just fully submerged nature and the peaceful solitude it offered, though disrupted by the storm outside, was one of the little moments where I tasted freedom.

The only opportunities my name, though a respectable one, could offer were in marriage—which felt suffocating more than anything. I had always been living in a gilded cage while outside eyes called it freedom. And yet, one could only imprison the body, for the mind was untouchable. In that sense, *I* was untouchable.

A drop of tea landed on my skin as I placed the cup on the windowsill, my

attention directed towards a shadow outside in the storm, hiding between the trees—yet it seemed darker than the forest. It had appeared for but a fragment of a second; a moment so short it could have been my imagination, but I was nevertheless convinced it had been there.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to see between the trees that had merged into a dark void, their branches swaying more peacefully in the wind, but there was no sign of the shadow. It had been darker than the trees and bushes for certain, as if the night itself had borne and tethered it to its womb.

I shook my head, thinking that perhaps the tea had been tampered with somehow though before I could turn and leave for my room, Alba's figure appeared before me, and I lost my balance. The tea cup tumbled to the floor, where it shattered as I took hold of the windowsill, my heart racing violently in my chest.

"You startled me," I breathed, lips parted in surprise as I stared into her dark eyes which seemed more dull than usual. She did not move a muscle, even as the shards lay around my feet and the remnants of the tea sunk between the wooden floorboards where the carpet didn't cover them. In fact, Alba seemed to not be breathing at all.

"Go out into the woods tonight." Her vacant stare remained for a few seconds more, until her features relaxed and life returned to her eyes.

"What did you say?" I breathed as a paralyzing wave shot through my body.

"If you would be so kind and step aside, Miss, I need to pick up the shards." I must have stared at her blankly, because she then gestured towards my feet. Her movements were fluid, her skin almost translucent. It made her look different and not entirely herself.

"Oh, of course." My voice sounded different, as if it came out of my mouth but didn't belong to me. As if the words had been pre-written, and I was a mere medium for them, a vessel.

Alba knelt down, and I heard how she collected the shards one by one, humming a soft tune that was partially swallowed by the wind. I tried not to listen, for the melody was haunting to my ears as I took a fistful of my gown and left without another word.

A lightning bolt cut through the darkness outside, briefly illuminating the otherwise dark hallway. I hadn't noticed that someone had extinguished the lights already—perhaps Alba before she had approached me.

Something was dripping closeby, the sound reaching my ears just as the wind stopped and the thunder calmed. Perhaps a few raindrops had found their way inside

through a broken window, but there was no cold breeze making me shiver. It was even uncharacteristically warm for a house like ours, yet I shivered.

The dripping got louder—so loud that it could have been right next to my ear. I dared to look outside, only to see that the rain had stopped completely. My warm palm pressed against the freezing glass of the window, my breath leaving clouds on it when I inched closer. For a moment, I thought I had simply imagined the sound, but then I felt it on my cheek, right underneath my eye; a drop had fallen from the ceiling, fallen onto me.

My fingers, trembling for unknown reasons, brushed the liquid away.

I felt it before I saw it—the thickness of the liquid, the metallic stench invading my nostrils.

Then, I turned and felt the scream erupt from my chest the moment my eyes saw the red color on my fingertips. I covered my mouth quickly with my other hand, stopping myself from waking the rest of the house.

Blood had dripped onto my cheek, smeared on my finger and left its mark on my skin.

I looked up and saw nothing.

The dark ceiling had no mark of the deep red liquid on it, or any liquid for that matter. Slowly, I lowered my hand again, eyebrows furrowing in confusion as I dropped my gaze to my fingers, which were clean once more—as if a ghost had brushed over them and absorbed the drop.

My heart hammered in my chest, the air suddenly thick and heavy around me.

Out. I needed to get out.

Thinking about what Alba had said, I ran back down the corridor as the thickness of the air forced itself down my lungs. I feared I would faint but, just as darkness blurred the corners of my vision, I opened the door.

Cold air greeted me, embraced me as I stepped out of the house and into the night, though I didn't stop there.

Barefoot and with nothing but a thin nightgown to shield me from the cold, I ran towards the woods. It wasn't far, and I did not even stop when something scratched my skin or a puddle threatened to make me lose my balance. I kept my eyes locked on the trees. Behind them, I could see fragments of the river. The river my father loathed, the river that robbed my mother of her breath.

Bushes were leaving burning marks on my skin, the rough bark of trees scratching my arms, but I only stopped once I'd reached the river bank, a deep exhalation

escaping me. Relief spread through my body as I sank to my knees, feeling how the moist ground met my skin and my fingers sank deep into the mud. And there, I wept. I wept until my lungs ached with each sharp inhalation.

A shadow loomed over me, watching. I stared at its reflection, too tense to move.

My cheeks were salty with drying tears when I turned my head, eyes wide—only to find myself alone.

I turned back towards the surface, fingers tangled in my hair which felt wet and slick on my skin. A few loose strands stuck to the side of my face, but my attention was drawn back to the shadow. It was still there, disrupted by faint waves. Only then did I realize it was the shape of a horse. Its mane was long and hung like thin strips of algae. My panic was replaced by something different, something familiar. I couldn't explain it, but the feeling made me lower myself towards the surface. The animal's image became clearer the closer I got—its mouth rotten and parts of it missing as if they had been torn off, exposing its teeth.

It was the red eyes that lured me in. The red eyes that made me reach out, slowly, carefully, body tense with anticipation. What I was expecting, I couldn't say.

As my fingers broke the surface, I was sucked under.

I felt the water enter my lungs, suffocating my screams while my body sank. Darkness once again claimed my sight, my mind, and my thoughts. For a moment, all was empty. Quiet. Forgiving.

Bubbles rose to the top, breaking when they reached the air, and my body surrendered to the sudden current. Yet my awareness did not falter; I opened my eyes and moved my limbs so slowly through the water that they could have been a part of it.

My fingers brushed the skin on my arm, and it felt leathery now. In the water, as I sank, I was finally able to see clearly. I was finally able to breathe. And, when I rose to the surface, saw the dim glow of my eyes reflected on the surface, and felt a foreign hunger in me, I finally understood.

I was different, but finally free.



Joelle M. Jones



Joelle M. Jones is a writer of beautifully dark fiction which tends to blur the lines between fantasy and reality.

Born and raised in Germany, she is currently studying English Literature at university and loves to lose herself in books—and movies—that allow her to escape reality for a while. At least until her dog decides it's playtime.

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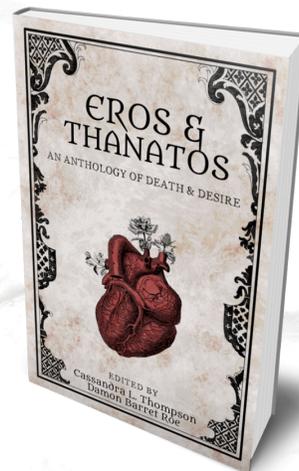
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We are so grateful for the stories written by our talented authors, and we hope you loved the poetry contributed by two of our community's poets. Thank you for your continued enthusiasm and support!

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 *Carnival*. 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.

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Sincerely, from Quill & Crow's Associate Editors,

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L.R. Wieland



TRIGGER INDEX

- **Child Death**

mentioned ◆————◆ *Doden*

- **Homicide**

blunt force trauma/beating

mentioned ◆————◆ *For the Roses*

burning

mentioned ◆————◆ *Transfiguration Day*



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