

The Crow's Quill

DECEMBER 2023

DARKEST ENDINGS

THE FINAL ISSUE

TALES OF GOTHIC DELIGHT

We bid you farewell with four tragic tales of traumatic loss, melancholy and murder, post-apocalyptic survival, and what can happen to lingering ghosts.

Poetry Interludes

Please enjoy our last two exclusive poems as we close out two years of short fiction and poetry.

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.



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,



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.



FROM THE EDITOR

Dearest dark hearts,

We've come to the end of our journey together. Time passed much faster than I anticipated, and I'm sitting here with a blank mind as I try to voice my full heart.

What can I possibly say that encompasses the honor and joy I've experienced from running this magazine? From reading phenomenally rich and talented works? From being exposed to the folklore and traditions of cultures I've never been blessed enough to know before? From being a part of new and established authors and poets on their creative endeavors?

What can I possibly say to any of that except thank you...

Thank you all.

Yours forever,

Damon Barret Roe

Damon Barret Roe

Assistant Editor (one last time)

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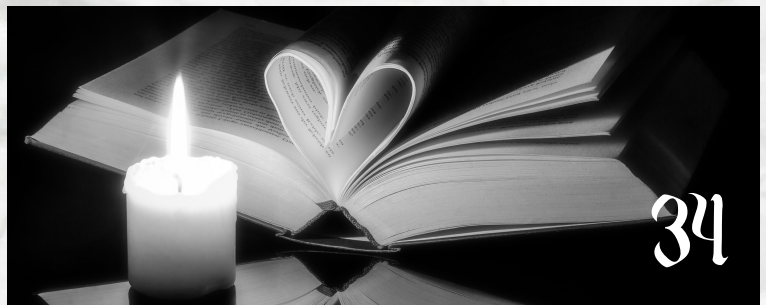
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THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Pieces of Us



WRITTEN BY
JACOB STEVEN MOHR

The approaching sirens sound like men's screams.

Joy sucks air and tastes smoke. A bath of noise and heat—she's staring at the world through a shimmering lacework of flame and twisted steel. The car—the steaming ruin of Ursula Teagan's grumbly gas-chugging Sentra—has her in a WWE bodylock, and the ref's slapping the mat for the three-count. Her body's folded at the waist, dangling from her seatbelt, her nose smashed sideways against the inflated airbag. Her face, slick with sweat and rain. Hot blood bubbles from one corner of a split lip, dripping down her chin.

Ursula, *sweet Ursie*, she's taking this all so well. Hasn't complained once about the windshield glass sticking in her cheeks and eyes. Or about how she'd bitten down on the soft black rubber hub of the steering wheel because her airbag didn't go off quick enough. Or about how her right ear had been sheared clean off by flying glass and dangled off her head by a pink string of flesh.



...SHE'D BITTEN DOWN ON
THE SOFT BLACK RUBBER
HUB OF THE STEERING
WHEEL BECAUSE HER
AIRBAG DIDN'T GO OFF
QUICK ENOUGH.

Then again, Ursie was never one to bitch.

Through a mad rictus of agony—Joy wonders if that ear can still hear the sirens.

Does it look bad?

Ursie’s voice at last, remarkably clear for somebody who likely can’t move her jaw. Joy tries to answer, but all that comes out is something wet and pitiful. “Heuuuuugh...”

No words. She chokes on blood, coughs it out. *Better not try, better let Ursie do the talking, she seems game for it. And things are getting noisy outside anyhow.* Joy’s head swims as she turns away from her friend’s ghastly visage, but through the haze of smoke and rain and night-dark, she spots blue-and-white lights spinning in rhythm with the shrill call of the sirens, hears a half-dozen voices shouting over it.

Joy wipes her mouth against the taut fabric of the airbag. Her lips taste like polyester and burnt skin. More blood dribbles down, and she clears her throat. “Hey—I think my foot’s caught on something—”

Shut up a minute, girlfriend...

Ursie grins, baring glistening teeth through shredded lips.

Don’t you want to hear what they’re saying?

So they listen. Ursie stays rock-still, her face flash-frozen in that grin. Joy rocks back and forth in the grip of the seatbelt, black slivers swarming at the corners of her vision. She blinks to vanish them, and her eyelids cake together. Outside, the men’s voices get closer and closer, splashing together like rain, like mud in puddles. All high and frightened—harsh with purpose.

“...the other car...”

“...bastard’s gone, total hit-and-...”

“...too dark, didn’t see a *plate*...”

“...inside? Can’t see through the...”

Then the passenger door groans and buckles and something like a huge metal crab’s claw punches out the bashed-in frame of the window, spreading it open like curtains. It shrieks in pain, and a man’s face appears in the aperture. Buzzed hair, trim black beard beaded with rain, his cheeks red from the heat and smoke.

Hot enough for you?

Ursie’s giggle is high and strange, muffled by the cushion of the airbag.

“Can you move?” the man shouts. His voice is like his tan canvas jacket and gloves, thick and solid. Already he’s pushing his head and shoulders through the new window, peering around inside the Sentra with wide, pale eyes.

“Something’s got my leg, I think...” Joy gurgles. *“Soffig’s gommeye lerg...”*

The man in the window looks down. “Sweet Jesus Gawd. Hold tight, we’ll get you out, miss.”

“What about Ursie?” Joy burbles. But there are strong hands prying the door open and yanking her out into the rain, away from the smoke pouring from the belly of the Sentra’s mangle.

Something catches her. It tugs like an impatient child, pain twisting her attention down.

“My foot...!” she screams, tries to scream. But, too late—the man pulls.

Something tears and cracks, the sudden agony making her world go soft...

“Jesus Gawd,” the fireman holding her moans. “Hey, hey, don’t look at that. Don’t look down, okay, you look at me, look at me and we’re gonna be fine...”

Howdy hoody...

Her friend’s voice floats in through the mesh of pain.

They messed you up good, Frankenstein. Lookit!

“Don’t...” the fireman warns. But Joy’s eyes drift lower, before she can stop herself.

The right leg looks just like a flesh-colored sock, limp and twisted, hanging off the hinge of the knee at an impossible angle. Tangy bile burns her throat. He’s carrying her rough, bearing her like a bride, one arm under her shoulders and the other cradling her thighs. Each step, her unmade leg flops like a trout on the beach and sends pain scorching up to her hips.

“Here, set her down, slowly now...”

The taut cushion of the stretcher pushes up under her back. Gentler hands nudge her legs into place, fastening them down and covering them with a sheet. But she can’t see anybody’s face. Everything’s wet and murky, a dark watercolor wash, streaked with rain and whirling blue light. There are dim forms above her—heads and shoulders and gloved hands touching her skin, touching her all over, manipulating her limbs and strapping instruments to her as the stretcher tips up and slides into the jaws of the ambulance. And beyond this: the orange bloom of the wreck, now fully aflame instead of merely smoking.

Inside, in the driver’s seat—is that a shadow, or the smoky silhouette of a figure? Hunched over, collapsed against the seat belt, trapped and squirming as smoke filled the cab, as heat turns her lungs into a swarming hive of pain, as the flames clean the flesh off long bones...

Joy struggles to rise, fighting the straps and hands that press her down. *So many hands*—she’s their prisoner, their unwilling witness. Across the rain-slick street, the Sentra burns. She can’t even see into the cab anymore. The smoke is immense now, boiling up into the dark sky. It would snuff the stars, if only there were stars at all.

“Ur—” She tries a shout, a last hurrah. But all she can manage is, “U-U-U-Ur—”

Don’t move.

Ursie’s voice, hissing close by her ear now.

Don’t move. I’m here. Let them help you now.

Joy stiffens. But she lets the gentle hands ease her back down, putting her skull between the hard fingers of the head support. A strap jerks across her forehead, tugging painfully at her hairline.

“Don’t move”—but this time the voice is wrong, harder and rougher, more focused than Ursie’s breezy soprano. A woman with short blonde hair and thin cheeks leans over her, haloed by the light overhead, her mouth and nose covered by a white gill-slit mask.

“Ursula,” Joy tries to croak, but the blonde doctor turns away, mumbling something to another shadow standing just outside Joy’s shrinking periphery.

“Get the oh-two prepped,” somebody barks. Then the ambulance door slams closed and the engine growls, gravel grinding under the back tires as they lurch into motion. “Poor kid. She’s slipping in and out—look at her eyes!”

A rubber glove brandishes a needle.

In a sudden burst of fury, Joy manages to slip one hand free and seize the offending wrist in a terrifying grip. “You—tell me—where you’ve got her.” Her voice is chesty and wet, coming up from some dark hollow place inside her.

“Who?” The blonde doctor’s husky voice is almost distracted, muffled by her mask.

“*Muphugger...*” Joy’s vision clouds, sinking into soft darkness. She squeezes the doctor’s wrist to steady herself. “Ur...Ursula. The driver. Where is she?”

The doctor’s face darkens. Her eyes flick sideways as she tugs her filter mask, toying with the elastic fastening cord. “Oh, honey. I’m...”

A deadly pause—long enough for Joy’s confusion to balloon into clawing horror.

“I’m sorry / She didn’t / The crash / On impact / Nothing we could...”

The words float and swim in Joy’s ears. But she doesn’t scream, not yet, not even when the doctor pulls her wrist free and turns away. Her flat, focused voice seems to come from everywhere, like she was a crowd, a gaggle of doctors all pronouncing

doom at once. But then:

Looks like they messed me up too, girlfriend.

Joy's head snaps sideways, but there's only the blonde doctor and her colleague leaning on the bench in the bleach-white ambulance interior. There's only the rubber-glove hand on her shoulder, bracing her for the needle. And there's Ursie's whisper again, close in her ear, close in her skull, clear as a doorbell's chime.

They were never going to take both of us.

So the cry rises in her, not a scream but a high crazy howl. She jerks and shrieks and shakes against the restraints, and even when the sedative takes her, her cut and bloody lips stay open, still in that horrible 'O' of terror, eyes still wide, staring at the ceiling, through the ceiling, transfixed by horrors only she can see, listening to a voice only she can hear:

Joy. It's all right.

I knew you wouldn't abandon me.

I knew you'd take me too.

I knew you'd do the right thing.

And now I'm here.

I'm here. I'm here. I'm here.



Jacob Steven Mohr



Jacob Steven Mohr does not believe in human consciousness; his works emerge as though from the ether, fully formed and fully ominous.

Selections of these can be observed in *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Shortwave Magazine*, *Chthonic Matter Quarterly*, *Weird Horror Magazine*, and *The Best Horror of the Year Vol. 15*. He exists in Columbus OH.

All socials: @jacobstevenmohr



A CROW'S

POETRY INTERLUDE



JOIN THE BRIDGE

Three words I whisper, and my bridge grows
Beyond the swamp's border,
A lighthouse glows hope of better places
From the sack over my back a baby wails
They always do, too young to know this
is for their own good
Newborns shouldn't grow in fear-poisoned villages
A chain coiled around my wrist
connects me to my kind
With a pull the docile line of villagers shambles forward
I compel the old man to move ahead—once the mayor
that burned Mama for a witch
Now a sheep and I, the shepherd
His footsteps thump over the flesh and bone
Of bakers, butchers, and sleazy peddlers
Three words I whisper to his ear,
and my bridge grows

AKIS LINARDOS

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents

The Sisters of Our Perpetual Wounds

WRITTEN BY
AMANDA M. BLAKE

Sister Worm tosses off heavy blankets and bares her body to the great blind eye rolling mad over the horizon. She is no remarkable thing to gaze upon. She will cover herself again to leave her cell after she has applied what poultice she can spare, and only on the worst. But the heat is good after a frigid night.

Her wound edges burn under His regard, and Worm crawls from her pallet. She remembers more comfortable beds like she remembers white puffy clouds, as though from someone else's life. But there is only this life, and there is glory in suffering.

Even the most mortifying of saints could no longer stand sackcloth in this heat on their new skin. They wear muslin now. Newer sisters never knew wool on their wounds.

Through the halls, footsteps and habits rustle like rumor around her in the



THEY SINK INTO THE
POISONED WATERS TO
BATHE THE SWEAT
AND GRIME OF DAY.
SOME SISTERS CRY.
SISTER WORM WEEPS,
TOO.

shadowed dark, small relief against the rising heat that will creep across the floor and scorch feet through soles, thicken the air until it hurts to breathe.

The night sisters still chant in the chapel. The day sisters descend to the kitchen, where those charged to bake daily bread swelter. Worm will bake tomorrow. Today, she breaks fast with other sisters. The bread itself is tough, dry, often burnt. It is old wheat or old flour mixed with old nuts, or sometimes old oats. Everything old. They can grow some things in the underground gardens, where the soil is cooler in the dark, although blight threatens every yield. They have also managed to keep chickens alive in the same underground, but it is a constant battle.

Worm sends a prayer to the saints on behalf of the ashes on her tongue, that they might finally know peace, but it is a blessing to feel so close to sisters no longer with them.



The sacred spring trickles into the anemic gardens. Multiple layers of gauze ease the glare of the great blinded, blinding eye as it burns over blackened land. In the old days, this was where the sisters would purify themselves. This place was never meant for growing things, but it's the only untainted water, and there's no telling when this spring, too, will dry up or succumb to corruption.

Mother Superior calls it a miracle. Sister Worm believes in miracles. The great unseeing eye is a miracle. That the working abbey still bustles with activity and adoration is a miracle. Waking is a miracle. She doesn't think the spring is a miracle. She thinks it's borrowed time. All other wells and springs are tainted and flame under a spark.

She spares herself a forbidden palmful—cool, clean, pure. The rest of her drink today will be old wine, some of which has gone to vinegar.

In the coop next to the gardens, Sister Worm scrapes the floor of chicken shit with Sister Cannula. They do not feed the chickens. Grain is too dear.

The chickens instead dine avidly upon the infestations, of which there are plenty, which is why, while all else fades and withers, the chickens thrive.

But chickens are not the smartest of God's creatures. They can't tell a cockroach from the scourge. Which is why the sisters must maintain their vigilance in the coop. Once they lose the chickens, all they have left is dust.

After cleaning the floors, Sister Cannula gathers unfertilized eggs to take up to the kitchens, careful not to let even one fall.

No chores at the abbey are easy chores. The scourge invades every corner, but they are especially persistent in the gardens and coop. If the itching under Worm's habit and under her skin, the fog in her head, or the heat of the day distract her from her duty, they might lose every chick from the last brood. They only have one rooster, and that rooster is getting old. There are other rooms to use as future coops, but they've yet to bring a brood to maturity.

The midnight sun flickers through gauze-stripped windows as bellowing winds billow the fabric. More dust to eat. She rubs at her eyes, but a tiny scream forces her to her feet. She grabs the net that once caught butterflies under a more pleased and pleasing eye.

She finds the scourge in a nesting box, trying for one of the chicks unsettled under a hen. The scourge will eat a chicken, as they will eat a foot, but chicks are easier. The hen squawks at the scourge, and the scourge screams back, its chitinous wings buzzing low and menacing. Too deep in the box to snatch with the net.

Worm grimaces as she reaches in to grab with her bare hands. She can't look away, or it might crawl up her sleeve and find juicier places to bite. A particularly rampageous scourge with some intelligence will bite straight through not to eat but to burrow, and they are almost impossible to remove.

With the hen pecking at it on one side and the corner on the other, there is only one way for the scourge to go: into Worm's hands.

Sister Cannula runs over with the large lidded bucket, but not before the scourge bites little rounded chunks of meat between Worm's thumbs and forefingers, screaming fury the whole time, even with its mouth full. But at least it does not sting. The dreams that such a trespass brings—

Worm shrieks as she tries to throw the scourge into the bucket, but it latches onto her hand. Cannula has to bat at it with the bucket lid. Finally, it releases her and falls in. Cannula covers the bucket with the lid once more.

As they catch their breath, Worm tends her wounds with fresh muslin kept in her pocket for such things. They used to use these for menstrual blood, but blood doesn't come that way anymore.

Though the scourge have wings, they don't fly well. They crawl through the walls, or their bellies to the ground. When Worm intercepts another, Cannula lifts the lid without fearing that the first will flee. More intelligent than chickens, but that doesn't say much.



At the end of morning shift, Sister Worm and Sister Cannula take the scourge to the chapel, where day sisters pray constant adoration under the blood-red glass. Cannula drops to her knees behind them. Worm carries the bucket to the altar, where Mother Superior reads Scripture in the good light.

Worm opens the bucket. Five scourges howl their devilry to the rafters while Mother retrieves her instruments—blessed, though old and no longer shiny, like Mother herself.

Worm must lift each scourge from the bucket for Mother to inspect. It is easier to grab them properly from the bucket, but harder to evade the others. Worm manages to avoid a sting as she presents the first scourge to Mother, vulnerable belly first, like a squalling baby. Its prickly legs beat fruitlessly against Worm's scab- and scar-ridden hands. Mother grabs the head with tweezers to keep it still.

The head is that of Father Scaleri. They often are. Mother says that the faces are the screaming damned, a face for every unforgiven sin. The sisters believe it.

Now that Mother holds the head, Worm shifts her grip to the creature's edges. It doesn't matter if she crumples the wings or cracks its legs. Mother brings a scalpel to the belly.

The scourge bleeds white and a little red into the altar chalice. Like diseased seed. Worm's stomach turns, but the sisters are experts at keeping what little they eat down, unless there is plague beyond infestation or a sister has a bad reaction to a sting.

Unlike cockroaches, the scourge is no good to eat. They taste deceptively like meat, even succulent, but the first time the sisters tried, two of their number did not survive the sickness.

Its ichor, however, is both analgesic and antiseptic, an essential ingredient in the poultice. Mother milks every scourge they can catch in their underground farm. In the cells, the sisters just smash them with old books filled with pages too faded to read.

The chalice fills to the brim with the five scourges. One more has Father Scaleri's face. One has Worm's father. The other two have faces that she's seen before, but she doesn't recognize them.

Their task finished, Worm kneels next to Cannula with the other four praying sisters. She opens her mouth as Mother recites the blessing. Mother squeezes the dropper of ichor into her mouth. They cannot spare wine or bread, but there is scourge enough for all. It tastes like seed, too. Not entirely unpleasant, nor is its

effect, a numbing not of flesh but mind. All pain, despair, ache, memory, dulled to a rubbed-out sketch—a gift.

Worm raises her gaze not to the red light but the cross, where Father Scaleri hangs, desiccated, diminished.

At the beginning of the end, Father Scaleri claimed their abbey, as he had so many nights before. He demanded first fruits in the name of sacrifice and took comfort in the sisters, scoring their backs and faces at any refusal for what spare luxury could be found in a convent.

Worm was one of the sisters who stabbed him in the chapel while Mother Superior watched in pious silence.

They strung him to the cross, carved what meat they could from him while he wept, then more when he could no longer. They feasted on him for days until the meat under the terrible burning eye spoiled. The rest they left to the cockroaches and beetles, flies and their maggots, and continued perpetual adoration until all that was left was bone and leathery hide even the insects would not chew.

There was Father Scaleri, and others who had penetrated the abbey walls to plunder its shelter, the miracle of its spring. But now there is such peace, such peace in this apocalypse—that there is nothing but the squabble of tired women and that arrogant men are delicious.

Body is a little harder to come by these days, but they drink of sinners' blood almost daily. The nothingness that the blood brings is its own ecstasy.



Before darkness falls outside the abbey, the day sisters descend into a different darkness—the deepest, dripping foundations. They cannot light a lantern, not even a candle. They help each other undress blind. They need no sight anymore but sighs, hisses where the muslin catches on suppuration. They are patient, gentle.

They sink into the poisoned waters to bathe the sweat and grime of day. Some sisters cry. Sister Worm weeps, too. The water hisses and bubbles against her. If they submerge for too long, scrub too vigorously, skin sloughs away. They scald in the deep cold of the venomous spring.

Suffering is the price of life. When Worm emerges from her daily remembrance of baptism, the final trial before night, she whispers with her sisters that to suffer is a blessing, bearing witness to the end an honor.

Once she is in her cell, she lights a candle in cooling dusk. There, she inspects

fresh bites, healing bites, old bites, scars, the boil patches of dormant plague reservoir, the black marks of dead skin flaking away from stings, rashes from bedbugs, patches from lice, watery scarification from bathhouse slough.

The sisters are deteriorating. A long, slow decay, much slower than the unholy Father. Some days, it seems like a mercy for what they suffered under his hands; others, their curse for rendering judgment before the mad God could take him Himself.

Worm crawls onto her bed but not yet under the blankets. She grants the closing blind eye a glimpse of what it has done to her and bathes in the grace of cold night on her extended Armageddon.



Amanda M. Blake



A mass of tentacles and rose vines masquerading as a person, Amanda M. Blake is the author of such horror titles as *Deep Down* and *Out of Curiosity and Hunger*, dark poetry collection *Dead Ends*, and the Thorns fairy tale mash-up series. Extreme family dinner horror novel, *QUESTION NOT MY SALT*, will be published in 2024 through Crystal Lake Entertainment imprint Torrid Waters.

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THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Blackberry

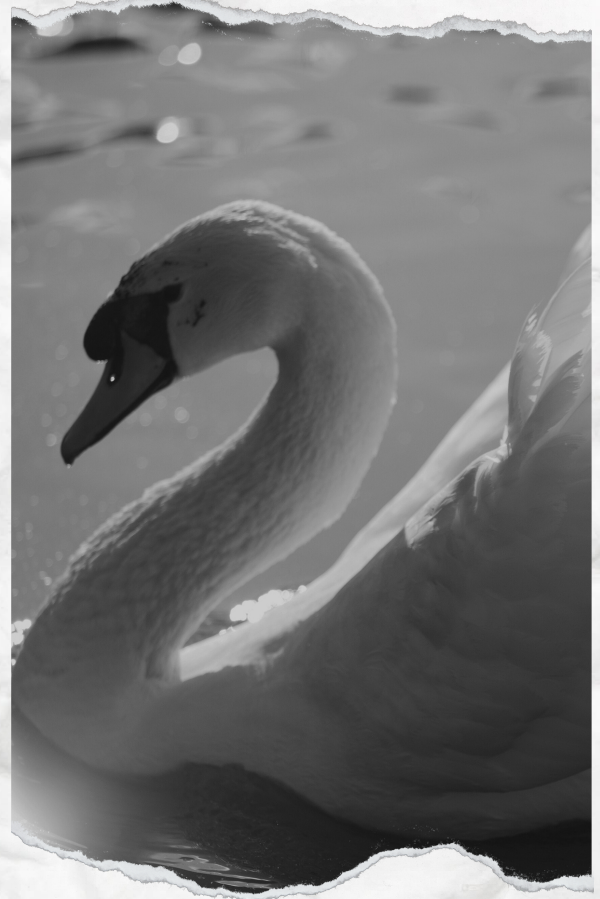


**WRITTEN BY
PIPER L. WHITE**

The fence in my backyard had remnants of a blackberry bush. Winter stole it from me and the vines shriveled, dark and turned to wire. I could snap them with only my finger tip if I pressed down too hard. Memories of warm days with baskets of blackberries and picking honeysuckles off the adjacent bush fueled me to make it through the cold.

My lover made it easier. She liked making pot holders out of fabric from the craft store and sold them on the weekends at markets. The older ladies claimed they made great gifts and sold her out every weekend, but she always kept two for me. I loved her creations, whether the fabric be solid or a funky pattern. My favorite had been a forest-green print with ivy on it. Green was my favorite color and I cherished those two pot holders. They were the ones I kept on the counter through each season.

Warm days and ripe blackberries were how I remembered my lover. She was a



**SHE WAS A SWAN. MY
LOVER, MY SWAN, IF
SHE DIED BY MY
HAND, WOULD THAT
FINALLY MAKE ME A
SINNER?**

swan. My lover, my swan, if she died by my hand, would that finally make me a sinner? I couldn't think like that as I wiped a soapy stripe down her back in the shower. The steam made me think sour thoughts. The heat, an irritant, damned me to a life of anger and craving salts over sweets. I watched my lover carefully, the way her shoulder blades folded forward so the water would wash away the white foam of sea salt & lavender body wash. Who was she anyway? A secret kept on the lips of people who still stuck their nose up at women holding hands, as if that's what made people martyrs. Or our forbidden fruit, the flag on the pole that showed off who we are.

Maybe I judged us too hard. Maybe I was the one who broke the comfort when I decided we needed to share separate blankets and a pillow-width distance on the couch. I scorned us, didn't I? It was those thoughts. It's always those damn thoughts.

I kept a journal to document the times I wanted my lover gone. I promised myself to only use the word 'dead' every six pages so it didn't become overkill. It was also a way to keep me away from the word. *Dead* sounded too final. Too aggressive on the tongue. Tonight I wrote about last Wednesday when I went to the supermarket to get ingredients for our special dinner. We always did this in the middle of the week to keep our lives fresh. Sometimes I wondered if it was to keep us from floating apart. My lover was spacey, and I ripped her down to earth too hard, but she'd fog me with all her air and I'd go up until we were opposing one another again.

Anyway, the supermarket. I think I wanted to drive my lover away. If I pushed her hard enough, she'd grab her magenta coat and slam the door behind her and I wouldn't have to be the one to cut the cord. She hated cauliflower so I bought a whole head of it. She preferred chicken over beef so I bought a pot roast. She thought the crockpot would explode if we used it and, *damn*, I wanted it to! But I received no feedback.

It was weeks of poisoning her with her least favorite foods but she never complained. She'd thank me for dinner and eat it in those small bites she always took to truly savor it. The first few times we went out to dinner, I thought she was a robot. Her dining was mechanical, as if she'd rehearsed it forty times before finally perfecting the right way to do it. So I took bigger bites. I nearly choked myself forking down the tender beef. *I* wanted to savor it.

I froze when she laughed. She *laughed* at my antics, thinking I was playing a part. I washed the meat down with unsweet tea and grabbed dessert for two. Nothing would crack my lover. She was too full of grace to split.

I wrapped my arms around her in the shower and inhaled the artificial scent of the body wash. I realized I hated her because she was whole.

While I dried my lover's hair off with a towel, I noted the freckles dotting her shoulders. I counted the constellations and named them. Her own galaxy, built just for her. A kaleidoscope of kisses from the sun. I never knew why freckles were seen as imperfections; they were perfect on her. But I couldn't stifle the bile in the back of my throat, alerting my nose to turn up. To keep my fingers busy, I braided her hair. A single braid down her back. The water dripped into the towel but, for a moment, it turned a deep purply-red. Like blackberry juice. I licked it off her skin. The juice, full and sweet. My lover giggled, arching her back. All it had been was perfumed water and I brushed my teeth while my lover watched me with bright eyes. She let her towel drop and I let her take me to bed.

The sex was never anything bitter. It was easy for me to surrender to bliss because the feeling was simple. I lit a cigarette in the bedroom and finally got a rise out of my lover. She cracked open the windows and left. I blew the smoke out slowly and flicked the ashes. Patience. Something I had when I was alone. The cigarette burned my throat, my lungs, the things I associated with passion. I let the butt of the cigarette go out in the ashtray and hated how much the cold air stole the scent from me. The unnatural chemicals masking that true tobacco. I'd light my cigarettes like they were candles for it. How come these intoxicating moments couldn't last?

I didn't want to be a person who rotted, so I took my lover on a date. There we were on a white rowboat in the middle of the pond. My lover touched the water with her fingertips and sent ripples that scared a frog off a lily pad. The scene was beautiful, pure serenity. I was reminded how much I loved nature and being sheltered by trees. They kept the sun out, kept the sky out, and kept everyone's secrets in. Maybe it was the cold that still petrified the air playing tricks on my eyes, but I saw my lover leap from the rowboat to become a swan. She waded circles around the boat and I felt cornered. She knew what was coming, but her laugh pierced my mirage as she stuck a finger in front of me. A blackberry was on her pinky like a hat and I popped it off her finger, into my mouth. I gritted my teeth. The mushy flesh of the fruit released stale juice, neither sweet nor sour. The air of the fridge stuck to the skin, its plastic coffin stifling what I considered to be nature's candy. I only ate one; blackberries weren't in season.

My lover watched the rain fall outside our window with a warm cup of tea in her hand. She stared at the backyard where the blackberry bushes used to grow. The

fence was lonely without the puckering fruit. I studied my lover and realized I would be lonely without her.

I could choose loneliness or my sanity.

I felt like I was slipping. I barely knew who I was anymore. It was supposed to be the other way around. She was supposed to find these realizations and leave me. I wanted her to leave me. Why wouldn't she leave me?

I found her crying underneath me and the knife I used to cut our fruit was in my hand. It wrapped around my wrist like vines and pulled me forward. My lover, my swan, stained by blackberry juice so red it would never wash from her pristine feathers. She was stained. I became the sinner I knew myself to be. All the proof was there. She was so fragile then. As much as she carried herself with fluidity, at that moment, she was flattened. If I even touched her, she would snap.

I left my lover on the kitchen floor, forgotten. The mirror in the hallway caught my stare. For a moment, I knew who I was again and I let myself cry the way my lover had. The tears were weak, trickling down my face, dissolving. I clutched my stomach, mourning, while the mirror made me watch it all. I lifted my finger up to its reflection and gently pressed.

I swore I heard a *crack*.



Piper L. White



Piper L. White is a self-published author and lead marketing/social media coordinator for Grimzy literary magazine. Her work has been featured in Atlantis, Carolina Muse Arts, amongst others. Her debut chapbook, *Barefoot in the Woods*, was published by Bottlecap Press in May 2022.

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THE TREACHERY OF MEMORY: A VILLANELLE

I hear them stirring in the shadows,
wings beating wild inside my head,
caws echo cries of a child long ago

Night devours light, summons ghosts of sorrow,
necromancers of nightmares hover over my bed,
I hear them, stirring in the shadows

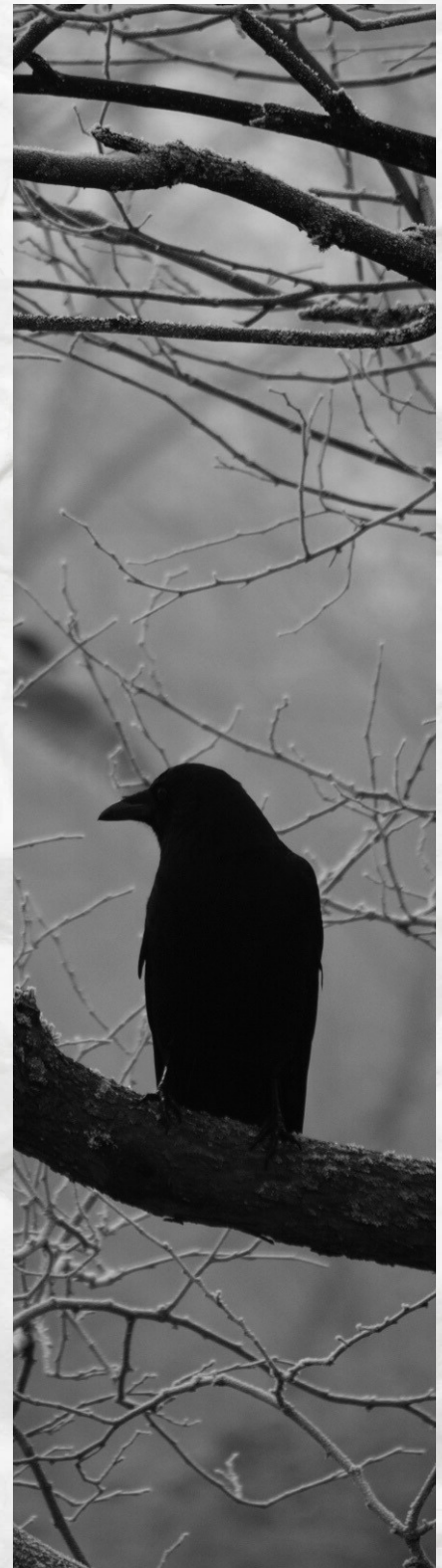
With each hackling beak, hope rings more hollow,
beneath ebony wings, horrors are bred;
caws echo cries of a child long ago

Stumbling, I run, and so they follow,
claws catching at denial's moth-gnawed threads,
I hear them, stirring in my shadow

Barefoot, I flee, through swift-falling snow,
to bleak cliff's edge, filled with dread,
caws echo cries of a child long ago

The ravens above, oblivion below,
I leap—lest my heart they ruthlessly shred;
nevermore shall they stir within my shadow,
caws, echoing cries of my child long ago

MELISSA COFFEY



THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Solitude in Celluloid



**WRITTEN BY
ALEXANDER MICHAEL**

Your first step into a quiet room.

Trepid movement across the way.

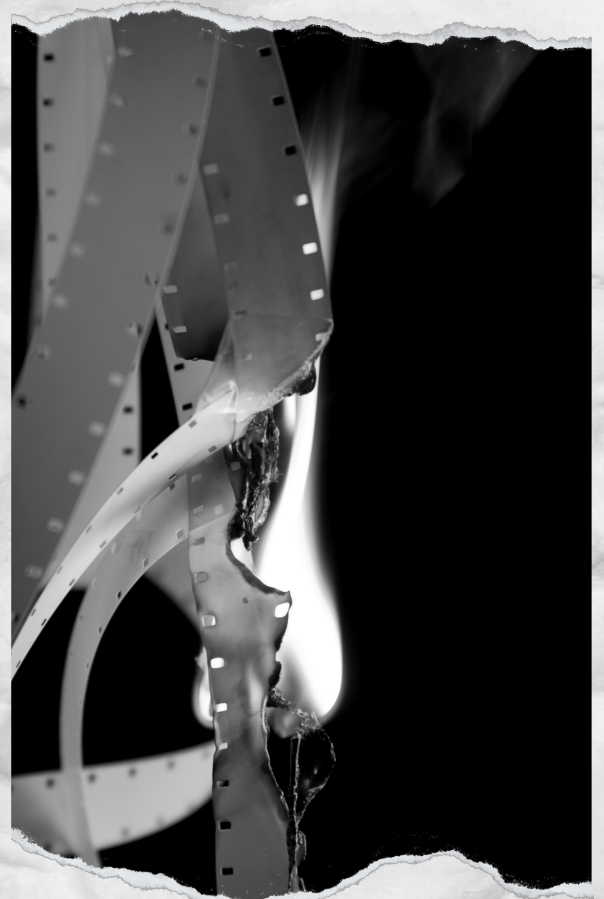
A voice by the window. “Why did you leave here for so long? You feel at home here. You feel at home...”

The door closes behind you with a whisper. The lights are off, and night outside the window is complete.

There is a story here. You are eager for its mysteries.

This is a den of art and memory. The smells assail you: pine; polished bookshelves; a hint of old incense. Wooden floors creak beneath the carpet. A writing room. A den of music. You once came up with a term for this place, and you called it a *melodaeum*. You’d forgotten that word until now.

Bookshelves line the right wall, book spines recently dusted. Their endless colors contrast well with the dark of the shelves. It’s a feast for the eyes, here in this quiet sanctuary.



ONLY THE VEIL OF
GHOSTLY LIGHT FROM
THE PROJECTOR
SCREEN MAKES THIS
SANCTUARY SEEM
BEAUTIFUL.

ALL LIES. CELLULOID IS
BUT A DREAM.

A sofa sits close to the books. If you sat on it, reclining like a sunning cat, you would see past the coffee table, the armchairs, the potted palms, and behold the floor-to-ceiling projector screen on the far wall.

Movement, flitting from left to right—non-existent to alive to non-existent once more. All those past moments filmed on celluloid.

This screen is the room's one source of light. It bathes the wallpaper in ghostly pearlescence: artificial and cold, but ethereal. The deep mahogany walls are complete with a flurry of painted bees buzzing between ripe lemons.

This room is much cherished, thus the books, the records in worn sleeves on the rack by the floor, and the films playing on the screen.

You don't look at the sad shape in one of the chairs.

You go instead to the far window.

Darkness envelops a backyard of well-tended bougainvillea and bird of paradise. They grow in thickets, lining a pale pink concrete wall. Glimpses of a forest across it. There is bamboo here. Thick stands of it sway in the night breeze.

A pool reflects starlight, its water black as the deep trenches. It is stirred from time to time by the wind before settling into complacency.

Is the water a mirror? Instead, does the pool offer entry to the dominion of the stars?

Wait.

The garden is not well-tended after all. It must have been an illusion. The bird of paradise are dead. The orange, purple, and green heads are stunted balls of decay. The bougainvillea is otherwise rampant, a vibrant giant strangling everything in its path.

You see another wing of the house stretching away to the forest. If you recall correctly, there is a greenhouse at its edge, along with a solarium. A crestfallen chapel sits alone at the edge of the woods.

You used to dream of this as a child. You once dreamt of occupying a place such as this: as elegant as this; as peaceful; as rich and luxurious and baroque as this. When you got older, you spent your afternoons here, in the pool outside while someone with a face you've forgotten sat reading on a lounge chair not three feet from you. Your heart swelled, remember? For the day and for her loving presence. Your dreams had come true.

It was easy for you then—in days of plenty and passion, during sunsets of laughter and vodka sunrises—to ignore past horrors. It was easy, when childhood itself felt like the stuff of imagination.

Do you remember it all? When *they* would tear themselves from their slumber to speak with you? None of them could be trusted. They all wanted something.

The day you opened the door to the solarium and found it occupied. The man in the hooded robe did not belong there, but that fact did nothing to change his corporeal form. He was undeniable. His enshrouded body threw a shadow. Dust settled on his shoulders. He was staring, whispering, and you felt his desperate touch on your palm.

Forced pirouettes in the attic with the ballerina in pink. That had been fun for a time, but you stopped going up there after she started screaming at you for trying to leave.

The sound of bells gave you anxiety throughout your adult life. You were never certain why. Perhaps now you recall the clown in the mauve and cream jumpsuit, dwelling on the chapel's balcony. Bells jumped and chimed at its wrists. The sound would always be accompanied by that of slippered feet, shuffling this way, burning eyes of white beneath a pyramid of orange tufts.

There is no denying it, here and now: someone sits in the armchair, alone, watching the images dance across the screen.

The moving images run silently. It appears many have been spliced together to create this seemingly never-ending montage of human moments:

A silent film. A woman with wanting eyes, anguished features, murmurs, *Cast out this wicked dream that has seized my heart* (1929);

Another black and white. A man and woman sitting on a sofa in a cavernous mansion, watching that very film on their own projector screen, one of them admiring the past, the other judging its pride with disdain (1950);

A man already covered in grime lops his own hand off with a chainsaw, screaming and laughing simultaneously as he evades demonic possession (1987);

An iconic character in a black suit pulls aside an otherworldly curtain, leaving that dreadful place, re-entering reality in a circle of dead sycamore trees. He spots the waiting woman beyond the circle (2017).

Beauty is a lie here.

Truth is rot in the corners, and the wallpaper is torn. Books have fallen from the shelves. The sofa has been rent into a mess of stuffing.

Only the veil of ghostly light from the projector screen makes this sanctuary seem beautiful.

All lies. Celluloid is but a dream.

Finally, all those years ago, one of them spoke to you.

You couldn't discern the age of the woman in the library. Like smoke, she shifted between states. Here, a beauty in a flowing emerald robe, cheeks of rose and eyes like the summer sea. There, pallor and stench; eyes of wanting and pain; desperation in her leer as much as her cloying fingernails.

You tried to run. Soon her form stayed in the guise of the old woman. You rose from the table by the bookcase. You turned to see her down the far end of the stacks, walking steadily this way. Again you fled, only to find the door jammed and the thing in the black shawl coming closer.

They all want the same thing.

Her hand on your throat, she whispered, "Tell me a story."



Here in the *melodaeum*, the viewer in the armchair has not stirred. Never does emotion filter into this room. The figure simply sits and watches.

The screen is now showing this very place.

Up there in the spotlight, beyond the screen, into that world of fantasy, this *melodaeum* is ethereal once again. There is no sign of dilapidation. The books are magic tomes filled with answers. The window gives view of the man in the moon. The viewer is enthralled.

It is all false.

You can see that the figure in the chair is a skeleton, that only small scraps of skin and flesh remain. The rest has gone the way of all forgotten artwork.

You stand by the window, taking in the room, looking at the place you came from.

You remember now. It all comes back to you. You had it all, you lost it all, you entered the *melodaeum* and collapsed into the armchair before the projector screen—and grief carried you away.

In its last moments, the corpse in the chair birthed your spirit like a mother does a mewling child.

You're talking to yourself again.

Correction: I'm talking to myself.

What's left to do when these four walls are my entire world? How else to spend my time?

I can feel *them* all around me. The others, lost in themselves and their own dens of solitude. The solarium, the attic, the chapel, the library. Now I'm one of them, and I

want what they wanted.

Maybe someone will come. Maybe someone will discover my bones and find a way to save me.

Until rest, I'll watch the screen. All those plot twists. All those human moments of longing and belonging. Every day is Award Season when the day never changes. Fiction's all I have left: the only truth here.

I lift my head as the door opens.

I speak to my next imagined visitor, entreating upon them a story; another fiction; my only escape.

Welcome.

Your first step into a quiet room.

Trepid movement across the way.

My voice from the window. "Why did you leave here for so long? You feel at home here..."

My useless, looped entreaties start to sound like they might be addressed to someone else.

Someone out there in life. Someone out there, reading by a pool, a million years ago. A home of heart. A fading face. A memory once captured, filmed on celluloid.

The film lost, the lines forgotten.



Alexander Michael



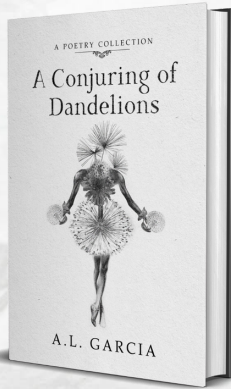
Alexander Michael is a dark fiction author based in Australia, and a member of the Australasian Horror Writers Association. Halloween 2023 saw the release of a new novella, *Home*, a haunted house story with a cosmic twist. In October 2022, he was selected for publication in Pyke Publishing's debut anthology, *Lunatic Lullabies*, a book of horror filled with writers. Earlier that year, Alexander released *Everything is Summer*, an illustrated dark fantasy/horror novella. Stories, nature, and music are his biggest loves, so he will often combine the three out walking national parks, using the time as a source of inspiration.

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FAREWELL

Dearest Readers,

Saying goodbye to The Crow's Quill is not an easy thing. This magazine has truly been a work of love and has meant so much to me over the years. In fact, one of my poems was in the first issue. It was also the first place to publish two of my short stories, both of which I'm still proud of. Soon after, I began to proofread each story, poem, and everything in between, and I've gotten to work with such an amazing team.

It has been an honor to carefully read each story and poem and to see the talent of this writing community. I hope you all know how much I have enjoyed reading your words and how grateful I am that you trusted us with them.

Thank you to the readers, the writers, and the poets. Thank you for sending us your works and for reading the issues each month. Thank you to Damon, William, and Cassandra for letting me work with you and for making this magazine what it was.

Much love from my little black heart,

K.R. Wieland

K.R. Wieland

Associate Editor

TRIGGER INDEX

- **Body horror**
 - mentioned..... *Pieces of Us*
The Sisters of Our Perpetual Wounds
- **Car accident**
 - mentioned..... *Pieces of Us*
- **Coulrophobia**
 - mentioned.....*Solitude in Celluloid*
- **Death**
 - mentioned/implied.....*All stories*
- **Murder**
 - mentioned.....*Blackberry*
Our Perpetual Wounds
- **Sexual assault**
 - implied.....*Our Perpetual Wounds*

THANK YOU

We are so grateful for the pieces written by our talented authors and poets. And thank you to our Crow family and community for your continued enthusiasm and support!

And of course, to our Kickstarter 2023 backers, we owe you so very much and we hope we made good on the bright year you helped make possible for us.

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