

The Crow's Quill

JUNE 2022

MELANCHOLIA

TALES OF DARK DELIGHT

Turn the pages on seven stories that will guide you through the depths of grief, regret, shame, and fear. Find your way through the darkness that makes its home in the human heart, and be changed.

Poetry Interludes

The Crow community brings you two new poems that explore *melancholia* in unique ways.

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.



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Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.

FROM THE EDITOR

Dearest dark hearts,

This issue is a special one. Well, they all are, but this one is different to our usual fare. What sets it apart is the exploration of something we perhaps don't emphasize enough in our themes: raw, unfettered emotional turmoil. It's key to Gothic fiction—navigating the dangerous depths of the human condition—but our usual themes explore the inexplicable and supernatural more than the one thing we all eventually experience: melancholy.

In these seven stories, you'll find tales of fatal grief, morbid and violent fascinations, supernatural and demonic soul-twisting, and so much more.

Please refer to our trigger index as this issue will hit hard, perhaps harder than any other. Stay safe in your dark explorations.

Yours,

Damon Barret Roe

Damon Barret Roe

Assistant Editor

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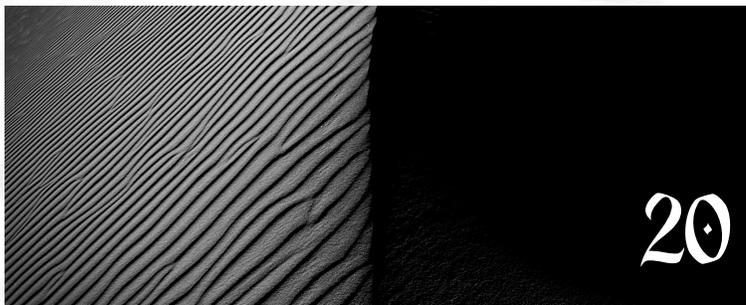
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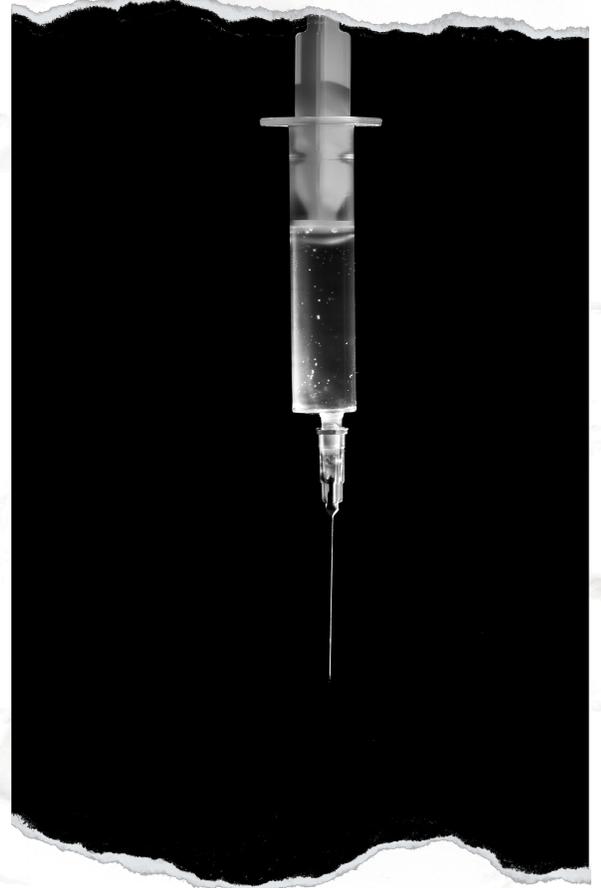
**WRITTEN BY
ROHINI MORI**

She wears black as if she was born to it, her velvet dress moulding to her wraith-like frame. Her brimmed hat casts her face in shadows, its lace netting and dark feathers accenting the pale slope of her neck. Heads swivel at her approach; a collective of whispers trails in her wake.

I watch her from a distance. She sits in the front-most pew and bows her head. Grief has mapped trails down her spine; she hunches, too stricken for her neck to support the sorrow in her breast. She remains seated when the congregation stands, her devotion to her mourning steadfast.

Outside, spring trembles under ashen skies. There is a humid cast to the afternoon, and a flirtation of ripe cherries on the cool-warm breeze. The priest's voice is a gentle drone. I shut my eyes as I think about the eternal passage of the soul, the shedding of mortal skin for salvation's shroud.

The first clod of earth hits the coffin, but still, she does not look up. Her arms,



**Oliver had been
careful never to mark
or mar; no stains to
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anything but a new
bride's blush.**

secreted in demure sleeves, hang at her side. She stares at the ground, her hat's sable plumes nodding in the wind.

After the service, the mourners gather at her house. The living room is suffocated in flowers: hothouse lilies choking on spumes of baby's breath; dark red roses, moody and morose; gaudy sunflowers, both cheerful and irreverent. The crush of bodies is intense, and I gag as stale perfume mingles with hushed condolences in the cramped, sweltering space.

She stands still in the crowd, as lost as a hatchling fallen from its nest. Sweat sheens her brow. Her hat lies crushed under a large woman on the sofa; unmoored, her hair falls in a sleek river down her shoulders.

I watch from the sidelines, applauding her attempts at conversation, the courageous smile she cannot—will not—let slip. She is the picture of elegant bereavement, and I ache at her struggle.

When my longing becomes unbearable, I separate myself from a cluster of dark-suited bodies and approach her where she stands.

Her eyes, fastened on me, are panicked. Her lips quiver as if she means to scream. "No," she whispers. She takes a furtive step back and collides with a guest—a relative of the deceased, I think, for there is a delicate sniffle, an exchange of commiserating smiles, a press of hands that lingers overlong.

The older man departs and she turns back to me, refusing to meet my eyes. Her voice is soft, plaintive. "No," she repeats. "Not here." A tear whispers down her cheek and she says, softer still, "Not now."

Turning, she disappears into the sea of mourning bodies, into waves of dark satin and tweed. She leaves me standing at the foot of the stairs, alone in my own longing and grief.



When I return later that night, she is waiting for me. She lies upstairs in the large four-poster bed, her petite paleness dwarfed by its masculine frame.

No words are needed as I pull her to me. The sheets are cool under our bodies, the pillow beside hers saturated with her dead husband's dreams. The scent of cherries is ripe in the room and, beneath its wings, her sorrow flows into me like water, like a flicker of ash from a spent, dying fire.

She cries out, and I release my hold on her at once. Pain seems to shiver from her elbow into her wrist. Her flesh swells, petalled in the room's brittle light.

My rage seethes. I am no stranger to her bruises; I have known of their dark truth long before I pressed kisses to their mottled, livid blooms. “Alicia,” I whisper.

Though I know she recoils out of instinct, her fear hurts me all the same.

I stare again at her bruises. Each is a defiant flower, blooming stark against her marble-pale skin. She has grown adept at hiding them under turtlenecks in biting December, and high-collared dresses that defy summer’s stifling press. She traps them under her clothes, like feeble moths beating their wings against her ribcage’s hollows. It grieves me to know that Alicia is as much a victim of her pain as the reverse holds true.

In the beginning, Oliver had been careful never to mark or mar; no stains to suggest she wore anything but a new bride’s blush. Over time, his arrogance would grow. Never her face, but other parts of her, parts she would hide under unfashionable necklines and sleeves—parts that belonged to a husband alone.

I would visit Alicia once or twice a month. She was a songbird caged, but in my arms, I vowed she would remember how to sing.

I tremble as I reach for her again. “Alicia.”

She curves into me like a pale sickle moon. Slowly, I press my fingers to the cut on her lip. No longer hidden under lipstick, it pools with fresh blood as I puff tender breaths on her tear-stricken cheeks. Her hurt is laid as bare as her skin, as bare as her grief and all her other secret pain.

I shift on the bed and Alicia hugs me closer. She moans, her unmoving mouth speaking volumes around her shame.



In the kitchen, I make Alicia a cup of tea. She sits at the marble counter, looking through the arched windows at the florid patch of garden outside. The roses that crawl over the wall crumble and char under June’s crushing kiss. The promise of summer makes me whimsical, and I squeeze a slice of lemon into Alicia’s tea.

“Does it ever get better?” she asks. She licks at her lip. The skin is crusted, her split flesh mending. The shadows under her eyes are the colour of rot.

“All things heal with time.” I smile to offset the casualness of my tone; it is the truth, even if it comes off as a platitude.

I gaze at her arms, no longer hidden under long woollen sleeves. I am pleased to see that, like the roses outside, her bruises, too, have withered. In a matter of weeks, Alicia’s skin will be unblemished once again.

She hunches in her seat. The late afternoon sun gilds her hair with gold, and I cannot help but think she is the most beautiful woman I know. Even her abject despair does not rob her of her grace. Her tea sits undrunk at her elbow. I push it towards her but she turns her face from me. Her hands, even in the kitchen's gentle warmth, are corpse-stiff and cold.

“Things will get better soon. You’ll see.”

The curve of her mouth whispers that she does not believe me.

I feel a sudden rush of anger, and then an anguish so acute, it tumbles from my lips without warning. “He would have killed you,” I shout. The desperation in my voice mocks the quiet suffering in her eyes. “Goddamn it, you know he would have, Alicia. It was just a matter of time.”

Her shoulders sag in her dark cotton dress. The colour, like her complexion's pallor, does not suit her. She wears it well enough—just as she does her own bruised skin—but she is a woman meant for florals and pastels, not dejection's somber hues.

She gnaws at her lip and the skin splits afresh. Blood and spittle fleck her chin. Her eyes, when they gaze into mine, are the purple of a descending sunset. “Perhaps,” she replies, the word gusting on a sigh. “But I wonder if we should have killed him all the same.”



The human body can withstand a shocking amount of pain—I am a doctor, I should know.

A nick here, a scraped knee there. Over time, her grazes would blossom into cuts, her bruises into broken bones.

Oliver was jealous, and in his pride, he was cruel. On the eve of Alicia's thirtieth birthday, he hit her so hard, she flew face-first into the wall. A concussion and cut lip were the least of the damage. Hours later, Alicia would start to bleed—it was the gentlest of mercies that she hadn't known she was pregnant.

An idea hatched, like the love between Alicia and I, over the many months that I tended to her wounds. And as soft as the first whisper of spring, a plan took form. Like a breath of air—like bubbles in a syringe.

Her husband was a brute even asleep. Splayed across the living room sofa, he gusted fumes of whiskey across the polished wooden floor. No needle's bite registered when the cannula found its way home; his veins wormed fat and blue over his track mark-riddled arms. It was no secret that Oliver abused ketamine like he did his wife

—a simple enough cause: death by overdose.

I filled a second syringe to the brim with air. I turned then to Alicia, pale and trembling in the doorway. Even in her desperate horror, she was still the most beautiful woman I knew. “Alicia...”

Her face was streaked with tears, her lip spilling fresh blood down her chin. Her hand, cupped around her stomach, cradled the memory of what might have been.

“Alicia, my darling...”

Some unnameable emotion flickered in her eyes. Ever so slowly, she nodded.

Elation filled me as I pushed the plunger home.



The summer comes and autumn follows, and like the passing of the seasons, the marks on Alicia’s skin fade. The bruises on her heart, though, will take much longer to heal. This is expected, for grief is a complex, untameable thing. Still, the smallest changes are triumphs enough, measured in the blood she has spilled and the tears she still cries. We celebrate them all, Alicia and I. The good and the bad, the sweet and the sour.

In August, Alicia takes up painting again. She potters in the garden, pulling up the straggling roses she once could not bear to part with. In their place, she plants pansies, their bruise-coloured blossoms an emblem of her survival.

In December, we read together in the living room’s glow. We sip hot cocoa and make love in front of the fire, spilling our hopes and our dreams into each other’s hollows. The winter passes, and with it, the season’s painful thaw.

When April arrives, we box up her husband’s possessions. We toss them all—her memories and his shirts—out on the sidewalk. We stroll through the park and watch movies that make us smile. We go shopping for clothes to show off her bruise-free skin. We make plans to move in together during the fall. In time, I am hopeful we will be blessed with a child.

The weeks flow into months as we talk and laugh, reminisce and repent. Sometimes, during those long, dark nights of the soul, Alicia cries. And each time, I hold her close and comfort her as best I can. I stroke her hair as I would a helpless child’s. It is a difficult thing to have loved a monster; I know Alicia still struggles with Oliver’s death as much as she celebrates her freedom.

Time heals all wounds, and just like the bruises that once petalled her skin, Alicia will learn to weather her scars. What grief doesn’t kill, it will temper and sow. I

remind Alicia that our love is like the roses that once grew in her garden. Under the black soil of her pain, something beautiful will bloom from the ashes of hurt and the darkness of despair.



Rohini Mori



Rohini Mori writes dark fiction that is sometimes fantastical and other times whimsical. Her work has appeared in *Infernal Ink Magazine* and is forthcoming in the summer edition of *The Siren's Call*. She lives, dreams and scribes in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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A Still and Weathered Stone



WRITTEN BY
AMANDA M. BLAKE

He is old enough to be her father, so everyone whispers that she seeks his fortune and he seeks beauty to draw his curtains at twilight. But he courts her as a gentleman. Every compliment wrapped in poetry brings a blush to her pale cheeks, life to her lips, and lowers her eyelashes; a smile hidden for propriety's sake, though she has always been guileless—naïve, some would say, not sheltered, but sweet as honeysuckle to her marrow, honey in her blood.

He is not the only gray-feathered bird drawn to the fragrance of her innocence, but he is the only one to cradle her shallow, fragile roots and plant her in lush soil to grow rather than wither under a firm hand and the burden of demands far too vigorous for a temperament so tender, so delicate, even in her youth.

He does not desire immortality within her. He has sons and daughters from other wives to carry his name and funnel wealth from his estate, and he has already



**He is midwinter in
the cold, cold
ground, and she is
summer raining
salt on stone.**

signed away the business—a partner in name only and a shareholder staked to sons more industrious than he.

When he caresses her neck with the gentlest brush of lips, when he draws away her gown for the moon to glow upon skin that only ever felt sun through its reflection, when he gathers her over him and she finds strength in her thighs and blood under her nails, he only wants to relish in every last thrum of pulse reminding his heart why it yet beats. Not to recapture youth but to taste it, to remember the purity of nectar before it richened to vintage, and to add all the flavors—subtle and robust—that life has given him, to richen hers in anticipation of what it can become. “Live, live, live, my dear girl, my darling wife,” he murmurs against her forehead. “Live when I can no longer.”

And she strokes the coarse hair on his chest and replies, “How will I live, my beautiful husband, when my life is gone? I thought that I had only half a life—not even so much—and that the rest I would yield to those who would draw it from me in slow, greedy draughts to satisfy their perpetual thirst. I thought I was a mere vessel. But you show me that I, too, may drink just as deeply. How can I ever again be content with half-lives, brought to a guillotine at every epoch until I am fingers and toes and widow’s weeds and what little else after I am gone?”

At his urging, she drinks as deeply as she desires, drawing groans that echo in their hollows that they fill and fill and fill to the brim—silos of a generous harvest in his autumn, chilled with a breath of winter but under her warm summer rain.

He cultivates her like a botanist and tends and feeds her like a gardener, until between his fingers, her roses withhold their thorns. He introduces her to music, to literature that turned his youthful head, and experiences it all anew through her pliable wonder. He drinks from her as deeply as she does from him, overflows every damn day to bring down the moon. She is his love, a study in sybaritism unfettered by obligation.

She married fortune, and he married beauty to close the curtains at twilight.

He sleeps every night with her hand on his chest and her head tucked against his arm. She is still within her summer when midwinter steals his last warm breath, rendering him cold under her cheek when she wakes. She calls and he smiles but stares, unseeing, when she gazes into the glass mirror of his eyes.

Swift death drapes her in widow’s weeds too soon, somehow unexpected in spite of deep crow’s feet and the silver her moonbeams glittered at night.

She lays him in the family plot on the property’s edge, a serene cemetery

surrounded by iron spikes, guarded by stone angels over gravestones, weathered in wind, rain, and dust, some overgrown with moss, cracked from persistent roots seeking purchase over decades—ancient sentinels over the quick, the late, the departed.

“Why do angels protect the dead?” she asks behind black lace.

His fortune maintains her beauty, but the roses grow their thorns anew, and the respected and disrespectable alike say she was too delicate a bud to have been clipped so soon from her father’s branches, as though she were bird’s wings and not a cutting in newly turned soil writhing with activity beneath the surface.

The epitaph she commissioned reads stark in the gentle gray, *Beloved son, husband, and father, in every role, in his prime. A broken heart could never have enough time.*

He is midwinter in the cold, cold ground, and she is summer raining salt on stone. Her widow’s weeds fray and lighten to charcoal as they absorb the sun. The slate sky snows frozen tears to join hers, blooming an alarming red in her cheeks that compels the housekeeper to insist she return to fire and light, and a hearty meal for which she has no more heart.

Morning to night, she sits at the gravesite, murmuring things that the servants cannot hear and grow to fear. They whisper that the lady of the house has gone mad, like rot that rolls back rose petals as though burned.

“He would have wanted you to live your life as he lived it with you,” the housekeeper urges, plying her with luxuries—both sweet and savory—to entice a barren, hollow appetite. “It would have broken his heart to see such youth and beauty squandered on the dead.”

“But don’t you see that he is still here? Here he stands in effigy, if not in flesh, and if death has parted us, distance has not.” Black gloves caress the carved stone in the visage of an angel carrying a raised spear, but not to condemn the figure beneath, not with such a sorrowed expression of compassion.

New life emerges from once-dormant earth where she sits at her angel’s feet. As green weaves through the gray, the young widow deepens in her dark, grieving beauty. Tears carve rivulets down the stone of his thighs and a pocked pool in the palm of his cupped hand, in which she rests her cheek when she speaks. She vibrates the stone with the poetry he introduced to her and beads of words—rhyming and not—that no poet ever thought to string.

Gray weaves through the green where she wears a trodden line from manor to

grave. When strangers enter the estate, they see the woman adorned in black, tear-streaked face uplifted to the gentle angel in imploration, the color leached from her sun-scorned skin, from the unsavored apples of her cheeks, from touch-starved and wine-thirsty lips. They believe her just another cemetery stone until she turns to watch them move through her world. As though the living are the ghosts that haunt her.

She accepts no visitors herself, no audience, no reverend, no doctor. She leaves the life of business to her husband's sons and the business of living to the lawyers. She seeks succor only in the lap of her husband, in memories as vivid as reality. A reality in which he does not laugh, in which he does not love, and his heart does not beat against her temples as she sleeps—a life that is not a life.

In the cemetery, she is not a widow, but a wife.

Heat does not shed her mourning or bring a flush to her face. She remains a still, gray figure, small and thin, fraying black weeds edged in verdigris, hems fading in dirt and dust like ash. As summer brown burns into gold, she clings instead to the encroaching darkness and does not mind the chill that draws her shawl tight around narrow, bone-pressed shoulders. She recites poems in languages no one understands and sings hymns for gods no one recognizes, but when she meets the angel's eyes, her own spark autumn's gold in the glass with the joy of recognition.

The housekeeper bundles herself in her coat and deep in the woolen wrap of her scarf to beg her mistress. "The sky is white with impending snow, and her ladyship cannot survive another winter beholden to such a grief. The dead cannot move on if the living cannot live. It is time to come in from the cold and drink deep from all that your husband has left for you—a whole world, my lady, and that is not a gift given to many. He would have wanted your heart to burn again."

She is tucked against the gravestone, arms around a skirt once black with grief, now running gray into the dirt, like everything else. Tears drip like steady rain, soaking into the moss that climbs the weeds, but they streak from open eyes that do not blink as she gazes with love unadorned and unheated into those of her angelic husband, bound not in flesh but in stone, hand to cheek, hair to thigh, neither young nor old, nor happy—worn and weathered by the slow evaporation of water from crystalized salt, premature cracks on a young lady's pallid cheeks. Under the servant's hand, her skin is cold as that of her last moment with him, when he was both alive in her mind and dead beneath her.

The housekeeper stifles a cry in the too-silent cemetery. She chances one more

touch to shake her lady's shoulders without shattering them, but for the first time, the lady is strong, immovable as the inevitable.

Her widow's weeds fall away like discarded sackcloth.

She would have cost a fortune to carve, this exquisite beauty forever comforted, forever guarded, forever her eyes uplifted to him as he raises the spear for what threatens from below, both devil and worm.

Underneath his epitaph, etched with nails broken to the quick, *His devoted wife yields to love so sublime. A heart without blood is the beat of a crime.*



Amanda M. Blake



Amanda M. Blake is a cat-loving daydreamer and mid-age goth who loves geekery of all sorts, from superheroes to horror movies, urban fantasy to unconventional romance. She's the author of horror titles such as *Nocturne* and *Deep Down*, and the fairy tale mash-up series, *Thorns*.

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THE CROW'S QUILL
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The Life of Sand



WRITTEN BY
TORI VANPROOYEN

Scarlet tones echo across the sky with a soundless resonance, mesmerizing those who pay respects to the dying of golden heavens. An endless cycle of growth and death to remind all life forms of their impermanence. Those entranced by it also experience the thrill of what is born from the setting of the sun.

The birth of dusk signals the rise of the nocturnal; their looming eyes watch and wait. They seek as humans seek: love, vengeance, justice, entertainment, victims...redemption.

Dense clouds brought this particular night faster than a lazy sunset. It was made of a foreboding summer turbulence, a storm restricted to the sky. Streaks of electricity outline clouds, mimicking the sun for half a human blink. Night creatures are more capable of appreciating nature's tempestuous magnificence. Many view humans from afar, mere outlines on the horizon, until they are in front



**Kevin's fearful mind
crushed his wanting
heart and he broke
away, pulling
Derik's soul with
him.**

of you, offering a choice...



Kevin sits alone on the beach watching the distant storm and the closing of another day. He welcomes the night and his self-inflicted penance. The weight of it sinks him further into the soft sand. Sand which has held his weight, and his regret, every Saturday night for three years. Always pulled back to the evening tides by the past's undertow. A ritual meditation honoring the one he loved and hoping, one day, to find forgiveness.

The sand still holds the imprint of their childhood castles. The lake breeze echoes their teenage laughter as they attempted various sports and romances. They grew together on this shore, their summer ritual never faltering. Until it did.



“Hey, Kevin!”

Kevin turned from pulling weeds at Sarah's voice. “Hey!” He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He was a mess, and his elusive, gorgeous neighbor decided *then* to speak to him.

Sarah's family had rented the cottage next door and she had spent the majority of summer buried in books. He'd wave when she caught him looking to see if she was busy, and she'd return his wave with a smile, but she always hid back in her book. His inseparable best friend, Derik, would nudge him teasingly whenever they headed to the beach.

“I had a reading goal this summer...college classes don't offer much time for outside reading. Sorry for being so asocial.” She looked down at him still kneeling in the dirt.

“It's no problem.” He stood and he caught her blue eyes rising with his chest where his shirt clung. She looked away quickly. To rescue her from embarrassment, he added, “Hey, you and your book can join us down at the beach anytime.”



Derik had been banned from visiting until Kevin finished pulling weeds. It was a laughable punishment for staying out later than normal without informing his mom, despite being twenty-three years old. It was his mom's odd way of showing love and also asking for help; things she struggled with since his dad ran out on them ten years

ago. He was happy to help, and it eased his guilt over staying out with Derik, walking on the pier until morning twilight. Every summer, there were strange disappearances, and his mom was obsessed with old wives' tales of night creatures.

His exhilarating walk with Derik triggered heart palpitations throughout the day. His body was a roiled mixture of butterflies, smiles, and sweat-inducing indecision. It all seemed like some cliché romance novel where the protagonist's best friend falls for them. However, he panicked when he realized any action could irreversibly alter the status quo he found both comforting and agonizing. Cliché or not, Kevin had been struggling with that decision all day.



Last night, the empty pier was swallowed by black waters. The closest light source at that midnight hour was easily half a mile on shore. Kevin wasn't sure how his hand ended up in Derik's but he was not opposed. Derik had always prided himself on his strength, so Kevin held onto him as he leaned over the edge. The waves splashed over his legs, threatening to bring him into their abyssal fold, but Derik held firm and Kevin never felt safer.

Heart beating from elation, he moved away from the edge. Kevin's heart didn't calm, though, as Derik stroked a finger over Kevin's pulse. Their eyes met in the dark, Derik's black hair blending with the backdrop of the lake, in contrast to Kevin's blonde, unruly and wind-tossed. Derik bit his lip, like he was holding back the words his eyes betrayed. He had always been the reserved one, but Kevin wished he would submit to that intriguing impulse.

"We should get back, your mom is going to freak out. You know our phones don't work well near the lake."

Kevin's eyes went wide, surprised he misread the situation. "Oh right, of course."

Derik's golden brown eyes held Kevin's for a moment, until he leaned in, wrapping him in an unyielding hug. Kevin's heart almost pounded out of his chest. Derik's breath sent shivers down his spine. "Do some *serious* reflection, Kevin." He ran his lips along Kevin's neck slowly. "Don't answer now, but consider the friendship and trust we've built...and what we could be together. I know you lean toward women but, by how you're responding to me, I don't think that'll be an issue." He backed away with a knowing smirk that Kevin registered with fire. Derik held Kevin's wrist to his lips and kissed his rapid pulse, slow, seductive. "I need you to be honest about what you want."

Derik led Kevin back along the pier, leaving the darkness behind them, both unaware of crimson eyes watching from the shadows.



“Kevin?” Sarah was looking expectantly at him. “Did you want to join me for a walk this evening?” She waited, biting her bottom lip, reminding him of Derik.

“Oh! Wait—just us? Like, only you and me?”

She nodded and winked. “We can start with a walk and see where the night takes us...”

Her implication was clear and Kevin’s mind hazed over with an impulsive reply. “Is after dinner alright?”

Her bright smile shone up at him. “Of course. Just come over when you’re ready.”

“Will do.” Kevin turned back to his chore as she walked away. The prospect of the evening should’ve left him excited but, instead, he felt a terrible foreboding.



Kevin finished weeding, and helped his mom prepare dinner. Derik joined them at his usual time. Afterwards, they cleaned up with an unusual silence.

“What’s up?” Derik asked as he gathered the plates.

Kevin was pulled out of his chaotic thoughts. “Huh?”

“You’re awfully quiet.”

“Oh, yeah, just...” he paused and figured it was time to rip off the bandaid. “Sarah asked me out.”

Derik froze. “And?”

“Um...I said sure. We’re just...going for a walk. I’m supposed to grab her in a few.” Kevin felt as though he was trying to justify a mistake.

“I see.” Derik’s monotone put Kevin on edge. “So, is that your answer?”

“My answer? To what?” Kevin mentally kicked himself as the words escaped.

“Really?”

A guilty taste lingered in Kevin’s mouth. “I—”

“Don’t bother. I know now *I* shouldn’t have.” Derik’s biting words made Kevin flinch. Derik left the plates in the sink and fled from the cottage.

Kevin dropped the dirty silverware and ran after him. “Derik, wait, please!” He caught up, reaching for Derik’s shoulder, spinning his best friend around.

Derik used the momentum to pull Kevin in, planting his lips upon Kevin’s in a

chaste kiss open for potential.

Kevin was stunned but his body responded, wrapping his arms around the person he was afraid to admit he loved. He parted his lips and his heart to Derik in a way he never realized he wanted.

Time froze them but the sky began to shift from gold to crimson.

Kevin's fearful mind crushed his wanting heart and he broke away, pulling Derik's soul with him. They looked at each other, unable to speak amidst stuttering breaths. Derik slowly stepped toward his best friend and like a spooked cat, Kevin retreated. "I can't..."

Derik, feeling powerless, watched his soul run away.



Derik had disappeared that night.

Sarah, now a therapist, had Kevin as her first unofficial patient on that walk three years ago; he had poured out his honesty to her, and she had listened patiently, offering sound advice.

He had run to Derik's cottage, desperately seeking him, hoping for him...to no avail. Kevin had been waiting ever since. He thought that returning to the beach every week was his way of keeping hope alive since the police had given up two years ago. This was their favorite spot and Kevin had never ceased showing up every Saturday at dusk, hoping. Kevin was drowning in remorse. Had he not betrayed his own heart and just been honest, trusted his friend, and communicated his fears, Derik would still be there.

Their last interaction made his stomach turn with sour butterflies. Kevin would never forget the pain in Derik's eyes. Those haunted eyes plagued each restless night. That was his true penance for the betrayal.

As Kevin ritually reminisced, but secretly hoped the storm would rush in and lightning would end his self-torture, he was surprised to find someone had sat beside him.

"D-Derik?" Kevin feared for his sanity and scrambled back in the sand.

"Hi, Kevin."

The familiar resonance snaked along his skin. Kevin was confused; this ethereal man resembled Derik but there was something predatory lurking below that human façade. "Derik, what happened?"

"I, too, was offered a choice, right after you made yours."

“But I didn’t really make one!” he protested.

“Well, I did, for the both of us. Please forgive me.” Derik held out a graceful hand, beckoning with those familiar haunted eyes.

Kevin reached back with a sigh of relief as he was gently pulled into a firm embrace. Kevin knew his suffering could end. “Our choices have been made but our worlds are divided. Please, take me with you.”

“Is it time to evolve?” Derik’s words whispered along Kevin’s inviting neck. “Kevin, I forgave you a long time ago; to grow, we must forgive ourselves.” Derik plunged elongated teeth into Kevin’s neck. Kevin sank into Derik’s arms, finally surrendering to his heart and his love. Kevin’s eyes wized with the dying sun. His last image of Derik showed the tired pain leaving his golden brown eyes as they transformed to crimson.

Derik carried Kevin to the empty cottage, carefully laying his sleeping form on the bed. He leaned down to kiss the pulse of Kevin’s wrist. “I’ll only take part of you with me. Goodbye, my love.”



Tori VanProoyen



Tori VanProoyen lives an imagination-filled life in New Mexico. She teaches delightfully challenging teens by day and writes poetry by candlelight.

Her creative endeavors are inspired by: playing with her black, possibly demonic cat named Vlad, slaying pixels during video game adventures, and lovingly torturing her foolishly-trusting friends as their dungeon master in Dungeons and Dragons.

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LET ME BURN

Looking for the peace
That silence brings
I found shadows instead
Clinging to the dark depths
Of the last of my humanity
They scream, bang, and claw
At the walls of my mind
Hungry for the light
I slam the door
But
They seep through the cracks
Spreading and
Slow drip, dripping
Poisoning everything they touch
And
I'm only human
I can only soak up so much sunlight
Before it starts to burn
So I burn, often,
Skin raw, red, blistering
Trying to sear away
The cries of this broken vessel
Singe my face into a smile
Turn myself into ash
For salvation

BRANDY

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



The Confession of Jechlan Maugh



WRITTEN BY
THOMAS RANSDALL

Jechlan Maugh! Jechlan Maugh! This name is a nightmare from which I cannot wake!

I knew Nathaniel Potter to be a stubborn man, obsessive in his pursuits. Dissociated from the common man, Nathaniel believed he had been gifted with the mind of a storyteller. *Homeric*, that is how he spoke of himself.

When he first uttered the name Jechlan Maugh absentmindedly, I paid it no mind. He retired to an estate in the village of Lijden—west of Boston—in the summer. I had not heard of the place, though Nathaniel assured me it was private and nigh derelict, a perfect hideaway to find the story for the hubris which afflicted him so terribly. I bid him good luck, expecting him to abandon the tale as he had done to so many others.

On a morning late in October, I arrived at my office to find Nathaniel's brother, Jacob, waiting for me at the door. In his hands, he held a letter, which read:



And he did so,
obediently, smiling
lovingly at the knife's
edge.

“Now, cut the lips
from your face. Slowly.”

Dearest Jacob,

Come thee hither to Lijden. J.M. awaits.

*Affectionately,
Nathaniel*

“Never has he written to me in such a peculiar manner,” he said. Indeed, Nathaniel kept Jacob as his closest confidant, the only one he would speak to openly about his darkest afflictions. I had known Jacob for years—longer, in fact, than I had known Nathaniel. Jacob was a good, kind man. The best I ever knew. However, he was quite anxious when he persuaded me to join him on his trek to the countryside.

And so, away we went by coach to meet Nathaniel.

For the first day, Jacob fretted about his brother and his interminable addiction to his craft. To keep the poor young man’s mind occupied, I suggested we observe the autumn forests. After all, I find it is best to divide—and perhaps reduce—one’s troubles into simpler issues. Simple distractions work best. But oh, how the trees glowed fine and coppery in the waning afternoon sunlight. We spoke about the coming holiday, of Christmastime and the New Year, and agreed that I might visit his family to celebrate.

By the second afternoon, we found ourselves in strange country. I noted first the grayness of the region; how the skies, the trees, and even the earth itself seemed sapped of color, of virility. A lingering chill forced me into my coat. I noted from the coach how the forests and hollows seemed afloat in a sea of hazy, gray mists. Jacob remained silent for the rest of the journey.

Now, I wonder if Jacob felt the same sense of dread I did in the final stretch. If not, then I blame myself for what came after. I could have altered the destinies of two men that day if I had only acted.

As we neared our destination, I imagined that Nathaniel spent his days locked in a drafty cell with naught but rainwater to keep him alive. To my surprise, the coach ferried myself and Jacob to the doors of a fine manor house of brick and stone, tucked firmly in the edges of a gray woodland. At the front stood two servants, lithe of body and alien in character, dressed entirely in white, save for crimson veils which hid their eyes. They greeted us silently, offering only a slow nod before ushering us into the house.

The interior was colored in the same sickly crimson as long-dried blood. There were no paintings, no tapestries, no comforting trappings of any kind save for three lamps whose light did little to affect the darkness. Jacob and I followed the two servants down a nave—or what seemed to be a nave—and into a fine dining room as sparse as the entrance. A long table with nothing upon it rested in the center. Two chairs sat at one end and, at the head, a third. And standing beside it was Nathaniel.

I did not recognize him at first. It seemed as if my friend stood a half-step away from himself, with only a portion of his face in a dreadful light and the rest of him in a pleasant shadow. He was dressed in a fine coat and trousers, with crimson trim and buttons of obsidian. And his eyes were not the eyes of the man I had last seen in the summer. I felt ill simply looking upon him. When he spoke, I felt death upon me.

“Dearest Jacob, come now with my friend. Welcome. Please, sit. I would very much like to speak.”

We took our seats, with Jacob to the left of his brother, while I took to his right. “Nathaniel,” said Jacob, “I am glad to see you. Are you well? It has been an age since I last received a letter from you. I’ve been worried sick—”

“Ah. Jacob,” said Nathaniel, tapping his fingers against the lacquered table. I noticed his nails, like stilettos, and how they pricked the table’s veneer. “All is well. Better now that you have come. And you and your family? How are they, little Edith and Agatha?”

“I suspect they are afraid,” replied Jacob.

“Afraid of what?”

Jacob leaned closer. “I leave them with no explanation other than their uncle is in need of me. I kept your letter a secret even from my wife. It was so unlike you, so cold, so distant. Who is this J.M. that waits for me? What has he done to change you so?”

Nathaniel smiled a joyless smile, one which stole my breath for a time. “Jechlan Maugh, of course. He is here. Quite interested to meet you, finally, in the flesh. I spoke of you constantly.”

“That damned story of yours,” muttered Jacob. “Come now, Nathaniel. You’ve gotten lost in that imagination of yours. It would do you good to come home with me. Leave this dreary place behind.”

“I intend to,” said Nathaniel, still with that devilish smile across his lips. “Once I am satisfied.” It was then that his demeanor changed. Nathaniel looked towards Jacob in the manner of a predator studying its long-hunted prey. His eyes darkened,

becoming diffuse, little more than shades set in a pale frame.

I thought it wise to involve myself. When I attempted to speak, Nathaniel silenced me with a raised hand. I swear, his nails had grown longer. I retreated, and there I remained silent in the soothing dark.

Then, not in any voice that might come from a man, Nathaniel spoke, “I know of monsters in the night. Not nearly as wicked as those that walk openly in the day. Yourself, for instance. The good father. The fine husband. Wealthy. Loved. Thief. Certain that your fortunes are set. How wonderful it is, then, that you are here to receive your due punishment.”

“What do you mean?” said Jacob, sorrowed by his beloved brother’s cruelty. “Nathaniel? What have I done to deserve such terrible treatment?”

“You live,” he replied, and it was then that I perceived, much less saw, the infernal thing that had forced him to stand aside from himself. I do not have the heart to describe it. I can only say that I knew I was in the presence of an entity, a being greater than myself, and all my hope died.

Poor Jacob did not notice the trap, for he loved us so greatly that he was blind to the danger. “Brother, please,” he pleaded. “Whatever I have done to wrong you, to anger you, to make you hate me, I beg your forgiveness. I cannot understand. Is it jealousy?”

“Jealousy? No, not at all,” it replied. It knocked thrice upon the table, summoning the same two servants. They carried silver platters with table knives, spoons, and linen rags. The servants placed their platters before both Jacob and me, then departed. Then, as Jacob cleared his tears, it took its opportunity to prick his wrist with a long claw. Blood beaded and dripped onto the table.

“What have you done?” protested Jacob, clutching his wrist. Though it only smiled devilishly, and waited.

Before long, I saw a change in poor Jacob. He looked euphoric, drunk on indescribable pleasures.

It then turned to me, and it spoke. “Watch.” Then to Jacob, it commanded, “Take the knife.”

And Jacob did so, obediently, smiling lovingly at its edge.

“Now, cut the lips from your face. Slowly.”

Jacob pulled his bottom lip taught and methodically carved his flesh where his skin connected to his gums. He then placed the bloodied meat onto the linen before taking the knife to his upper lip.

“Delightful,” the entity moaned in Nathaniel’s voice. “Now. Give me your teeth.”

With the crack of enamel breaking, with each wretched blow Jacob gave against his bone, I grew fainter until I was ready to flee. Yet it did not allow me, threatening me with its talons and its shadow eyes. And I watched as my dear friend, Jacob Potter, shattered his teeth and cut his ears and the flesh from his hands and his chest and placed each piece of himself upon the platter. All the while, it watched, enraptured by the hideous ordeal as if it were the greatest form of carnal pleasure.

Jacob shivered as he awaited the next command. I wonder now if perhaps there was a figment left of the man I knew within that ruined body. I wonder if perhaps I should have tried to save him. I was there. I had a voice. *But was this right?* I wonder now.

“Now,” it said, “take the spoon. Give me your eyes. Do it ever so slowly, Jacob.”

Jacob laughed as if it had become his purpose in life to cut away all that he was for the pleasure of a beast in his brother’s skin. He took the spoon, slipped it gently beneath his left eye first, and leisurely pulled upon the handle. His eye came out, dangling against his cheek on a line of crimson pulp. He repeated the process in his right socket.

“Cut your eyes away,” it commanded, lustfully.

I cannot recall what came after, which parts of his body the beast commanded Jacob to sever next. The servants returned with a length of crimson silk with which they used to bind Jacob once he had finished. Then, upon their master’s command, they carried him away to the bowels of the manor house. And he laughed as much as a man in his condition could laugh. I joined him in his rapture. As did Jechlan Maugh.

What did I do to Jacob Potter?

I believe, perhaps, his death weighs so heavily on my conscience because I did nothing to keep the beast at bay. Perhaps it is because, when last I saw him, he had been packed tight in a steel box beneath the eaves of a barn at the edge of the Lijden. A bloodied wretch, that was all that remained of Jacob Potter.

I returned to Boston to console young Beth Potter and her two girls. I became like a husband to her and a father to them for a time. Heavenly days, and the nightmare seemed to end. Then they grew restless. They inquired. And then I stood aside, half in shadow, half in light, and it put an end to the whole sordid affair.

Why is it that I cannot recognize myself? Why is it that in the mirror, I cannot see my face, but the face of a man I am certain died in Lijden?

The Confession of Jehlan Maugh

Thomas Russell

Why do my eyes darken?

Why can I not wake from this nightmare?



Thomas Ransdell



Thomas Ransdell currently lives on Izu Oshima, a small, volcanic island near Tokyo Bay, where he works as a teacher. When he isn't writing stories about the things that frighten the monsters which go bump in the night, he is usually stargazing with his family.

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A CROW'S

POETRY INTERLUDE



CIRCUS OF FAILURE

The pandemonium in my head
Drowns all thoughts of hope
Instead a circus of failure
A life of decay and frustration
Brightened with rays of hope
Dreams of brilliant hues
Surrounded with the stain of despair
In death, will I be deemed worthy?
Or destined to be a shadow?

STEPHANIE MCCLAINE

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Ophelia



WRITTEN BY
E.P. STAVS

There's something amiss with Ophelia. Something I can't quite put my finger on. The change was gradual—her smiles slower to surface, the light in her eyes not as bright. When they disappeared altogether, my parents worried something terrible had happened. That Ophelia was keeping secrets from the family.

Nothing turned up.

We departed London at the peak of the season, much to Mother's dismay. But the fresh air and vigorous activity of the country seemed the best option for shaking Ophelia free of her growing despondency. She'd always preferred the freedom of the country estate to the scrutiny of London's society, and she loved nothing more than flying across the countryside on the back of her favorite mare. Surely, a few long rides on Penelope would cure her doldrums.

We've been in Shropshire a full month now, and Ophelia has yet to go outside.



**The threads holding
my dwindling
patience together
snap. "Perhaps." My
eye twitches.
"Perhaps."**

Mother is beside herself. Ophelia doesn't seem to notice everyone's growing concern. In truth, she doesn't seem to take note of much at all. She sits, much as she does now, beside the window of our third-floor bedroom and stares blankly out over the manicured lawns. I stare back at her, looking for a flicker of life in those pale blue eyes that once twinkled at the mere hint of adventure.

I find nothing.

Flat, expressionless, nothing.

"It looks as though the rain ought to let up soon," I say, forcing a note of cheer into my voice. "There's a break in the clouds not too far off."

The steady patter of rain is my only response, each drop hitting louder and louder as they mock my sad attempts.

"You should take Penelope for a ride once the weather clears up. You haven't taken her out yet, and I'm sure she misses you."

She lets out a noncommittal hum, twirling a quill between her fingers as she continues to stare vacantly through the rain-streaked glass.

I try a different tact. "What are you writing? A letter?"

She glances at the unmarked scrap of parchment on the desk in front of her and blinks, a hint of confusion creeping into her otherwise stoic expression. "What am I writing?" she murmurs, and I'm not sure if she wants me to clarify my question or if she really doesn't recall. She stares at the empty paper for what seems like an eternity before sighing and returning her gaze to the window.

A scream bubbles up inside my chest, desperate to break free and demand her full attention. I swallow it down and reach for the pot of tea Elsa brought up an hour ago. It's cold, but I fill a cup anyway, adding a generous helping of cream and sugar. "Thirsty?" I hold the cup in front of her face.

She takes a perfunctory sip and sets it to the side without comment.

The old Ophelia would have spit out the blasted drink the moment it passed her lips. She dislikes tea at its best. Cold tea? Heaven help us.

Silence reigns heavy over the room, and I search for something to say. Anything that might elicit even a glimmer of the girl I once knew. "I hear the Hastings will be returning to Rose Hall soon." I pause, letting this news sink in before adding, "I imagine Elliot Hastings will be among them." I wait for the usual blush to color her cheeks at the mention of Elliot's name. It's been four years since she first noticed her childhood playmate was turning into a rather striking young man. Three since he nervously stole a kiss behind the stables. Two since he claimed her first dance at the

Coventry's Winter Ball.

One since she slowly stopped returning his smiles and faded into the walls, lost in a fog only she could see.

"Maybe you should send a note to invite him for dinner when he returns. Or better yet, a ride. You two always had the best time riding together."

Ophelia's voice seems a million miles away as she murmurs, "Perhaps."

The threads holding my dwindling patience together snap. "Perhaps." My eye twitches. "*Perhaps.*" Derision curls my lip, and I can't help the manic laugh that spills out of my mouth. "Perhaps," I hiss, "you should consider *waking the hell up.*"

"I am awake," she mutters.

My hand begins to shake, and I curl my fingers around the sharpened quill, channeling my frustration into the grip. "No," I whisper, "you're not. You haven't been for months."

She doesn't respond.

My grip tightens. "Why, Ophelia?" My voice is pleading now, my gaze locked on her blank one. "Why are you acting like this? Like you don't care about anything?" My toes curl inside my shoes, digging into the soft leather soles, and my throat burns as I whisper, "Do you even care about me anymore?"

Her lips part, but nothing comes out.

The quill snaps in two. "Damn it, Ophelia. Wake up and *feel something.*"

A compulsory urge, an undeniable need to make her react—my hand is lifting, the tip of the broken quill clutched tightly in my grasp. It hovers in mid-air as my gaze bores into hers, beseeching her to cry out for me to stop.

She says nothing.

I slam my hand down, embedding the sharp tip into the meaty part of her palm. Blood oozes from her but all she does is stare at the crimson droplets with that same, blank expression.

It's too much.

I drag the quill past her wrist, scratching up and down the underside of her forearm until it's a web of angry red lines. My pulse thunders in my ears with each pass, the quill digging deeper as my frustration pours out of me like sand through a sieve, but when I finally lift my eyes to hers, I find nothing more than an empty husk staring back at me.

The broken quill rolls off my fingertips and clatters onto the floor.

“Why don’t you just do everyone a favor and die already?” I whisper, frustration pulling the hateful words from my lips. “You’re halfway there as it is. At least then, people could move on. Mother could return to London with her friends. Penelope could find a rider who appreciates her. Elliot could call on someone without feeling guilty.” I smirk. “He’s had his eye on Josephine Pruitt for a while now. With you out of the picture, he’d have an actual chance at happiness.”

There—a reaction at last. Ophelia’s eyes widen as she takes a sudden breath in.

The chair scrapes against the floor as she pushes back from the desk. There’s a long pause as she sits there, blood trickling down her arm, and contemplates the window.

She stands and reaches for the latch.

Wind stirs her hair into a wild disarray as the glass panes swing open, and rain pelts her face, shoulders rigid against the cold.

She grabs hold of the frame and lifts one foot onto the ledge.

“What are you doing?” A chill runs down my spine as she pushes off the floor and balances precariously inside the window. She hesitates at the sound of my voice. Looking down, the height must be dizzying. “You aren’t really going to do it, are you?” Fear chokes me, and I lick the rain off my lips, desperate to soothe the sudden dryness in my throat.

It doesn’t work.

Ophelia leans forward, her fingertips still gripping the window frame as she eyes the ground. It’s a long way down. It’ll hurt, I’m sure of it.

“I’m tired,” she says, and I can hear the exhaustion in her voice. It’s edged with sorrow, but I can’t for the life of me figure out why. She has everything a girl could want. She has everything, and yet she feels nothing. It’s almost as if she’s forgotten how.

Her fingers slip free of the wooden frame, and gravity pulls her forward. A scream burns on the tip of my tongue, but she doesn’t make a sound as her feet leave the sill.

A parade of faces dance through my mind as the air wraps me in its fleeting embrace, faces twisted with the horror they’re certain to feel when they find me. Regret pricks the corners of my eyes as I picture the accusation in their gazes, the anger. They’ll mourn the Ophelia they once knew, but they’ll curse me, too. They won’t understand why it came to this. How can they, when even I don’t know the answer?

All I know is the pain I feel when my body finally meets the ground. I tried so desperately to wake Ophelia up, but all I've done is break her into bits.
I failed to find a way out of the fog, and now I'll never wake again.



E.P. Stavs



E.P. Stavs is the author of the YA fantasy romance series *The Shendri*, the thriller/romance novella *Split Therapy*, and the upcoming adult fantasy romance *R.I.P. Viola Winkle*. When she isn't writing, she's usually reading, mom-ing, or simply being a fun-loving nerd.

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THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



The Lantern



WRITTEN BY
REBECCA JONES-HOWE

Every day, I walked the hiking trail with my walkie. Its wooden boardwalk led through the forest of ancient cedars and ended along the jagged bluffs that overlooked the Pacific. The nearby resort owners hired me because I was large. They thought my height and broad shoulders would scare away the undesirable people who sometimes camped along the trail. The trail was for good people, not miserable, decaying people. My beige security uniform made me look like a good person, but inside I always felt in a state of decay. Most days, I'd watch the breakers and imagine the beige fabric turning dark as I slipped beneath the waves.

A graveyard in the sea, its depths filled with broken men like me.

My walkie buzzed with a report of a drunk woman wandering the trail. I found her on a bench before the bluffs, her hair like a yellow flame. She had a star tattoo beside her left eye. She held a bottle of vodka in one hand and a knife in the other.



**She'd gutted him, and
spread his organs about
the bed. He was so
young, his cheeks
gaunt, his limbs
scabbed.**

The handle was intricately carved, but it was the dried blood on the blade that pulled my attention.

"You've got strong-looking arms," she said, her grin spreading. "I bet you're good at holding things."

The ocean roared, but I couldn't pull my gaze from the red caked beneath her nails.

"Is that your blood?" I asked.

"Some of it is." She slid the knife into her boot and stood. The swell broke against the rocks behind her, spraying a mist over her mangy locks. Her smile beamed. Her eyes glistened. "I'll show you where the rest of it came from, if you want."

For the first time in a long time, my heartbeat accelerated. It burned in my ears, flushed my ruddy cheeks. Synapses fired. My lungs expanded, and I wiped a bead of sweat on my forehead before reaching out to take her hand.



She showed me the body of the man in her motel room, laying face-down on the floor in a dress.

"I can't lift him," she said.

I rolled him over to reveal a torso full of blackened holes. She'd painted his lips bright red, put blush on his cheeks and pink shadow on his eyes. She'd turned his broken gaze into something almost beautiful.

The walkie buzzed in my pocket, but she stopped me from taking it.

"I need you to help me," she said.

I pulled the trap from my truck and helped her roll the body inside. We cleaned up the blood. Its thickness coated my fingers and I breathed its warmth, the odor like metal in my lungs. After the sun set, I helped her carry the body to my truck. Then we drove. I found a place along the trail, a slope in the forest that was quiet and without people. We dumped the body off the cedar boardwalk. The man smiled as his head bounced. He slid beneath the brush, hidden under the cover of foliage and towering trees.

"He wasn't a good man," she said.

"No man is a good man," I said.

She bent down and retrieved her knife again. She came to me and pressed the tip of the blade against my chest. "Sometimes a woman needs a man." She smiled then, the black of her cavities like tide pools I could find home in. I imagined climbing

inside and clinging tight, just a helpless starfish in an angry sea.



I'd always been large and opposing. People always saw things that I wasn't. The noble man. The hero. The provider. The weight of expectation was always so heavy, weighing me down to my bed. My doctor gave me pills, told me that I needed to be outside, that I needed a job. All summer long, I smiled at the strangers I passed in the forest. They felt safe, seeing me in my uniform. For a while, the uniform gave me a reason to exist. Then summer ended and the tourists faded. Autumn brought a handful of storm-watchers, but soon, even they would be gone.

I didn't want to take my pills again.

I had been feeling so well on my own.

The weather worsened, bringing rain, but the lack of tourists didn't stop the chatter of the missing man. He appeared in the paper and on posters around town. He had a family, a house, a dog. Daily, I walked the trail in the woods, thinking about how lucky he was to have died happy. Daily, I walked past the bench, but the rain had already washed the blood away.

I knocked on her motel room door.

There were times she was gone, times when she was screaming, times when her silhouette vibrated behind the curtains, her fist tight around the knife. Then, finally, she opened the door and I got to see her without all the red. Her skin was sallow, her eyes sunken, her hair ruffled, but then I entered and her darkness beamed. She was small, the top of her head touching the burn in my chest. She felt like a tiny lantern in my embrace.

Then she went to the dresser and brought me a paper bag. "I found this at the thrift store and thought of you."

Inside was a plus-size bridal gown. I blinked and saw the ocean break.

She pulled out her knife and told me to strip so she could pull the dress over my head. The silk stretched over my shoulders. She couldn't do the zipper up the back and she laughed, placing the veil over my head.

"Are you going to kill me now?" I asked.

"You wouldn't be any fun to kill." She pushed me backward, then climbed on top. She held the knife to my throat and I groaned like a ship taken by a storm.



I took off the dress in the morning, and folded it neatly on the foot of the bed. She had marks on her stomach. Some were self-inflicted, but they didn't hide the stretched lines of flesh between her hips, red stripes where she once held life.

"Momma," I whispered.

At this she woke, reaching for the knife on the nightstand. She glared, but I still pointed, ready to die if she found offense.

"I had two of them," she said. "Daughters."

"Where are they now?" I asked.

"They're better off without me." She sat up and pulled her shirt back on. "I wasn't much of a mother. It never came naturally to me. Feeling doesn't come naturally to me. It only ever comes with blood."

"I'm a ship lost at sea," I confessed. I put my uniform back on, put the walkie back in my pocket.

"I bet you see a lot of other ships out there," she said.

"Only ships that know where they're going."

She smiled. "Those are the ships I like best."



Seagulls cried out each morning. I watched them fly around the tide pools, looking for easy prey. They split urchins and starfish, pecked at the barnacles, and devoured the tender insides. The storm watchers foolishly navigated the rocks. There was a sign warning them not to do so, yet they staggered over the wet stone, trying to get as close as they could to the breakers.

I waved them back, but they pointed their cameras to the swell instead, hoping to steal a violent moment of water meeting land. Waves hammered at the rocks, splashing their cameras, sending them screaming. Laughing even. Then they wandered back down the trail, unaware of just how close they were to death.



She dressed her next victim in the bridal gown. It didn't fit him. He swam in it, the bloody train twisted around his legs, making it appear as though he had a fish's tale. The lipstick she'd put on him was smeared. She'd gutted him, and spread his organs about the bed. He was so young, his cheeks gaunt, his limbs scabbed. A guppy. I cleaned his blood while sobbing, for the first time in years, fully sobbing.

The emotion raged from inside, tears storming in jealousy.

"You're only upset because I put him in your dress," she said. She shook me, slapped me. Then she stabbed me. Just a slip in the stomach, a pinch. A warning. I staggered back on the bed, warm blood spilling over my hands. She lifted the blade and licked it.

"You're pathetic," she said. "You're a beached whale."

I shook my head.

"If you weren't so pathetic, you'd help me."

I stood and took a step toward her. I tried to press my stomach to her blade, but she pulled away. I fell to my knees, crying a whale's moan against her breast. She dropped the knife, then got me a towel.

"Momma's here," she said. "I'll make it better."

Together, we found another place in the forest to hide the body.

"None of these men deserve a death at sea," she said.



The posters bled in the rain, the men fading, the danger simmering.

She couldn't find any more tourists to lure into her room, and so she moved from the hotel and into my little apartment. Over the coming days, the silence swelled her frustration, her need. When she got drunk, she got angry. She buried her knife into the walls, the floor, the table. Her chest heaved as she worked herself to frenzy, her fingers shaking, her face red.

"This is no fun!" she said. "I came here to have some fun! I just wanna have fun!"

I gripped her shoulders and wrestled the knife from her. Her entire body vibrated in my hold. She pounded at my fists with a wild fury through the night. I bared her rage, wearing her bruises until they faded.



My body ached as I walked the trail. New posters appeared, though they were no longer of the missing men. These ones featured an illustration of her face. I touched the star tattoo, knowing that if they found her, they would find me too.

She drank her vodka and laughed when I brought more to her.

"I really hoped I'd have more fun while I was here," she said, the crack in her voice burning desire in my chest.

I could die happily.

I would do anything.



I bought her a walkie and we found a channel to make our own. I watched as the bad men traipsed over the jagged rocks in the rain. They snapped their photos and walked back into the forest where she was waiting, dressed in a white parka, the hood raised over her head like a veil. I told her when they were coming, and then she took her grooms for ruin. She plunged the knife deep, over and over. The blood coated her, soaked her, turned her smile wide.

She became a lantern, a guiding light that held my attention as the men's screams shook the trees.

A couple found her on the path, laughing, her body drenched with life. They ran, but she didn't give chase. She raised her walkie and asked me to find another, but I was unable to before the police came. They surrounded her on the trail, their guns drawn. Blood dripped down her knife. She laughed in hysterics as the police wrestled her down.

One more, she'd asked for.

She just wanted one more, and when she smiled at me, I ran.

The police boots hammered the boardwalk behind me, but I tore through the foliage, down the slope. I found my way back to the bluffs and the bench where I'd first met her. I scaled the roped fence that separated land from sea. I looked to the water, where a figure stood beneath the waves, a lantern luring. I smiled and jumped, my uniform darkening as I slipped beneath her swell. She hammered me against the rocks and I clung, a black star finding home.



Rebecca Jones-Howe



Rebecca Jones-Howe lives and writes in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada. Her work has appeared in various publications, including PANK, Pulp Modern, Dark Moon Digest, and *The New Black: A Neo-Noir Anthology* and is forthcoming in the *Human Monsters* anthology from Dark Matter Ink. Her first collection of short fiction, *Vile Men*, was released in 2015 by Dark House Press. She regularly writes for *The Crow's Quill Magazine* and scathingly reviews V.C. Andrews books from her blog at rebeccajoneshowe.com.

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THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Brush Strokes



WRITTEN BY
BRYAN C. MILES

I remembered the church mourning her death with solemn bells and the procession's black train. I remembered the congregational cries confirming our abrupt loss. Doctor Agatha Martin was gone. A town pillar whose legacy of community service was deemed more important than her disturbed child.

Disturbed. The word still left me wishing to spill blood in her honor. How could it not?

Christ Episcopal's red brick was already messing with my head. Ornate black iron fencing still held whispers of false pity that made me hate myself. It didn't matter that I was parked on the street, the building still left me trapped inside a child's psyche. Intrusive thoughts took makeup wipes to my face, peeling away what took four years to create. *I don't want to relive this.*

Sensory recall left my hand empty, missing Kara's fingers squeezing for strength.



That's when I first felt it, the hair on my arms alive with goosebumps. A brief moment where Kara looked at me and I saw someone else.

Would they still be as soft? Would she even reach for me? My truck's windshield failed as a crystal ball, but the spidering cracks were relatable to how I felt.

I don't want to relive this, the words repeated. The events made no sense then and even less now. Dr. Martin's estate left me two things. First was a paid college education, but the second was an unknown gift promised after graduation. Suitcases and boxes in the truck bed spoke of my fulfilled duty. The face staring in the rear-view had grown since its small-town escape, leaving this homecoming a punishment. "You can do this, Shawn, just three days."



The trailer looked worse than I remembered. The vinyl siding was overtaken by algae, the yard by tall weeds. The woods had crept closer as the home decayed, ready to claim it with branches dancing over the roof. The screen door lay buried in the grass, its hinges ripped from the doorframe, likely the victim of an outburst. My father's red truck in the driveway left no possibility of avoiding confrontation—he was home. *I bet the door's not even locked*, keys cut skin, swallowed in a fist.

I pushed inside, discovering the same stained vinyl flooring and faded cabinets I left. But any semblance of familiar recall took flight noticing the old man at the kitchen table. "I'll be damned." He swept aside long hair to reveal humor dressing his face. Maybe he had been waiting for this moment.

"Hey, Dad." The smell almost knocked me over. It wasn't just booze; the house reeked of spoilage. Despite the drawn blinds, I could make out clothes and discarded food littering the kitchen and living room.

"Look at you, college man." He laughed while making an effort to stand, a gesture that nearly toppled him out of his seat. The scene left my feet frozen, unable to move as my shoulders were gripped roughly. A father's dominance asserted itself with blunt fingertips before delivering a condescending pat to my cheek. "Ain't you got something to say?"

"I'm just in town for a few days."

"Ah, leaving already?" He released me and stumbled back into his chair.

"I just need to settle some things."

Any semblance of laughter dissolved into a sneer. "Why are you here, Shawn?"

Every brave word that begged for release died under his disapproval. I had practiced it so many times, but being in that house again, in front of him, nothing had changed.

I was still scared.



“Shawn Turner?”

A hug and maternal inspection revived a child who would object to affection. I couldn't help it, Mrs. Constance Perry was more than the Martins' housekeeper. She was a mother to me after mine walked out.

“My sweet boy.” Two loving hands maintained their disbelieving touch. “You certainly have filled out.” A visible, teasing twinkle followed a playful poke.

“I guess I never lost the freshman fifteen.” I cleared my throat, embarrassed by the question I was about to ask. “Is Kara here?”

Constance took my hand, directing me to sit. “You saw your father, didn't you?” My terrible poker face provided confirmation. “That man.” Rare anger bit air as hands pulled an apron taut. “He still works hard around here, keeping everything up, but I just—”

“Is she the same?” I changed the subject, having no more energy for him.

Kara Martin. My childhood friend, my first crush, my first kiss and, at one time, my everything. She had always sat in her window nook, a perfect doll with cascading brown hair and porcelain skin.

“She's still mad at you.”

A rare expression of disappointment snapped me out of it. “What?”

“That girl you were seeing at school. That's why she stopped writing, but when your letters came”—Constance sighed—“it was the only time I saw life in her eyes.”

Disturbed.

Kara had always been different, abnormally quiet, with a soft voice rarely heard. She never told me why. Some blamed her 'condition' on the equestrian accident, but I just assumed Kara didn't find most people worth talking to. But since discovering her mother's dead body, she hadn't spoken a word.

Mourning.

Depression.

Disturbed.

In the end, I lost my only friend.



The Martin estate was old money, a historic home everyone envied. I certainly did, jealousy taking hold with each visit. Its pristine white and blue-gray exterior was adorned by upper and lower front porches. Even the guesthouse reduced the space I slept in to a shanty.

The sunset's last rays bounced off oak floors, casting warmth in my chest stronger than the lit hearth before me. *It's just as I left it.* A visitor may deem it superficial, a Southern Living magazine's dream, but it was the closest thing I had to a home.



"I don't want to hear another word." Constance aggressively fluffed under stern eyes. "I'll be in the guesthouse if you need anything, not that you don't know your way around." A soft sigh led to another hug, a longer one. "There are people who care, Shawn, please don't keep them waiting again."

My smile conveyed gratitude when words could not.

I was left alone in a second-floor bedroom, directly above Kara. I found myself staring at the hardwood floor, as if by exerting enough effort, I'd see her. I should have known better.



My sophomore Psychology professor claimed dreams pulled forward our hidden desires and traumas. The following morning, I was almost a convert. Kara had made my night restless, moments flooding from when we first met to conversations that never happened. What stood out the most was her voice, newly audible, but no longer the same.

I sat at the kitchen table, daydreaming of the backyard decorated by giant live oaks, when an apparition startled me. Kara. I leapt to my feet, gripping the table to steady myself. She paid no heed, methodically gathering her oatmeal and orange juice before joining me.

"You look great." I groaned at my choice of words. It was true, she always looked great, but it wasn't the opener I wanted.

Her spoon clinked against her bowl in answer.

"I'm sorry for staying here, it didn't go well with Dad. Constance was the only person happy to see me. I guess it's why I never came back during breaks. What was there to come back to?"

The accusation cracked her fair perfection. A stunned mouth, incapable of words,

cried in mourning. I knocked my chair aside, wrapping arms around her petite frame. Her face sought shelter in my chest as I offered protection from anything, even my misguided words.

For the rest of the day, I was reminded of how it felt to have Kara squeeze my hand. She kept a possessive grip of it. With care, I tried to pry a word from her, but my reward was limited to eye contact, smiles, and art.

I always knew she had a talent for it, but the room adjacent to hers had been converted into a studio. What piqued my curiosity was a mango wood room divider, concealing a corner. That's when I first felt it, the hair on my arms alive with goosebumps. A brief moment where Kara looked at me and I saw someone else.



“You two had a good day. Still sure you need to leave so soon?” Constance joined me in the living room with a mischievous energy and two cups of coffee. It was hours past dinner and Kara had excused herself for the night.

“We did.” Unanswered questions kept my focus on the opposite side of the house. “How long has Kara been in Dr. Martin’s room?”

“Maybe a year.” Constance grew rigid but continued. “After Mrs. Agatha’s death, I kept it as-is, but even after Kara moved in, she wouldn’t change anything.”

“Have you noticed anything different about her?”

Constance set her cup down, careful of listening ears. “She’s grown more distant. I know that doesn’t sound possible when the girl doesn’t speak, but I’ve found her outside some mornings, still in her nightgown. This summer, I found her cut to shreds in the rose bushes. I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Hey, we’ll figure this out.” I knew they were brave, hollow words. The woman across from me deserved better.

“Mrs. Agatha was right to put you two together. You needed each other then, and now.” A mother’s love clasped my hand with the weight of impossible expectations.



The following morning greeted me with a chill of loneliness inside the Martin home. Constance was nowhere to be found, and my requests for breakfast company were met with silence at Kara’s door. I reluctantly went into town for my bank appointment, my unknown inheritance’s retrieval from a safety deposit box.

A single envelope bearing my name in perfect cursive left me conflicted. How could something so small create such anxiety? I debated for hours where or when to open it, driving in circles, before finally taking shelter under the great live oaks in Kara's backyard.

In the letter, Dr. Martin's last words reached past the veil with percolating affection.

How I wish to be sitting beside you. To see the man you've become, to acknowledge the man you will be. I pray your four years at university have been as impactful as I dreamed. That you found value and worth in the mirror. That the love you gave others, you've finally returned to yourself. You weren't my son, but I loved you enough to knowingly break Kara's heart by sending you away. You deserved that chance. Please honor my memory by living the life you wish, not the life others decree.

I lost track of how long I cried.



When I gathered myself and stepped through the back porch, I instantly knew something was wrong. I had felt this cold chill before, and the memory compelled me to Kara's studio. I found her patiently waiting in the corner, the divider screen gone, a portrait now presented to the room.

"Kara, it's beautiful." I was awestruck with the likeness. Kara had captured her mother in unnatural detail no photograph could replicate.

"Thank you."

My blood curdled under wide eyes hearing Kara's voice from my dreams. I was so entranced, the studio door slamming barely registered.

"It's beautiful because she's bound to it." Fingers traced an arm's thorn scars, casting a spell. "I needed to breathe life into her through our blood, and her hair." A paintbrush was displayed as an arcane instrument. "Mother loved porcelain brushes." Stammering syllables brought a cursed smile. "It's ok. She made a mistake, but I fixed everything."

"What? What did you do?" Overwhelmed, I staggered backward, falling against the wall, then the floor.

"She told me about your inheritance." Pupils bloomed, silencing hazel irises. "She was taking you from me, I had no choice."

"She didn't—"

"You left me!" Lightbulbs exploded overhead, cutting the floor, my flesh.

Windows flew open with flapping curtains, casting moonlight.

“Kara...”

“I forgive you both.”

Amnesty was granted by a putty knife. Shock reduced me to an obedient, bleeding mannequin. Kara dug her brush into my wound, soaking its hairs before returning to the canvas.

“We’re going to be together. The way it should have been, the three of us.”

Soiled paints dressed in my blood birthed a discolored heartbeat that stretched cotton with a cresting head, shoulders, and arms, until Doctor Agatha Martin freed herself from the easel, born again.



Bryan C. Miles



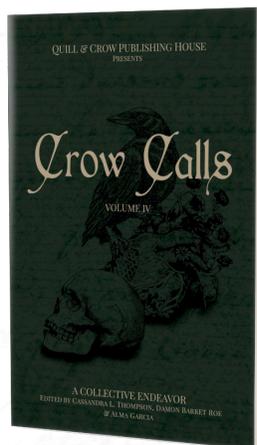
Bryan Miles is a multi-genre writer and poet, who loves crafting stories and the escapism books bring.

He is currently working on his first YA novel and can be found on Twitter. His poetry will be published in the upcoming release *Crow Calls Volume 4* by Quill & Crow Publishing House.

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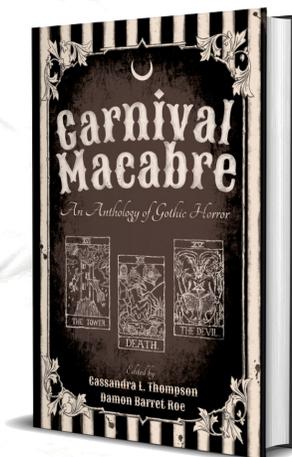
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A Crow Calls crop to rep Gothic poets.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are so grateful for the stories written by our talented authors, and we hope you enjoyed the poetry contributed by two members of our community.

Thank you, Crow family, for your continued enthusiasm and support!

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

We'd be honored to have a look.

Are you a poet?

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

Keep calling and we Crows may answer.

Sincerely, from Quill & Crow's Associate Editor,

L.R. Wieland



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