

# The Crow's Quill



NOVEMBER 2022

THE TOY BOX

## TALES OF GOTHIC DELIGHT

Celebrate the darkest time of year with six stories that bring toys and horror to a disturbing head.

*Poetry  
Interludes*

Enjoy two dark poems about toys, written exclusively for us by our beloved and demonic dolls.

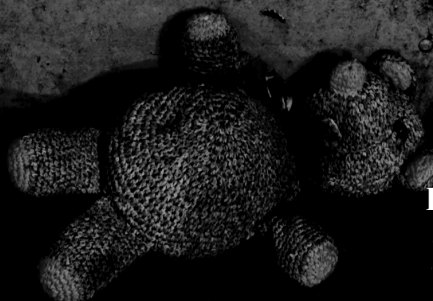
## TALES OF TOYS & TERROR

Revel and delight in the winning entry to our horror flash fiction contest.



*Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.*

QUILL & CROW  
PUBLISHING HOUSE



# CONTENT DISCLAIMER

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

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

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

Yours,

**QUILL & CROW  
PUBLISHING HOUSE**



# ABOUT THE HOUSE

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

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

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

...and we will probably feed you.



QUILL & CROW PUBLISHING HOUSE

*Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.*

# FROM THE EDITOR

Dearest dark hearts,

Our cherished Halloween may be over for 2022 but here at Quill & Crow Publishing House, it's a year-round atmosphere. It doesn't end when the clock chimes midnight, no. It lies dormant, waiting for its next opportunity to terrify.

For our November issue, we asked for creepy stories about toys and, as always, the community delivered. Sate your morbid curiosity about what toys can (and do) get up to when our backs are turned.

Not only that, but you all rose like possessed dolls to submit horrifying flash fiction for our *Tales of Toys & Terror* contest. Within, you'll find the entry that succeeded most in its dark endeavor.

Yours,



Damon Barret Roe

Assistant Editor

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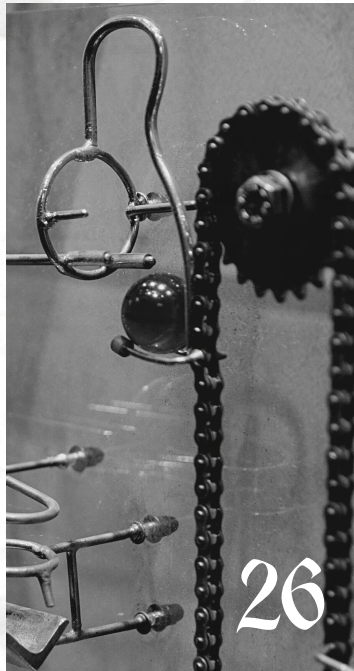


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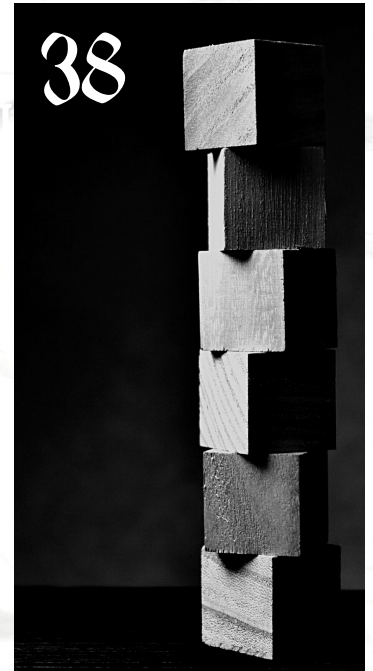
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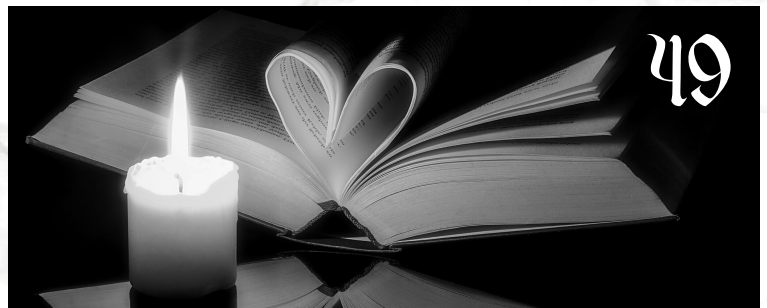
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THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# Ragged



WRITTEN BY  
AMANDA M. BLAKE

Grown-ups had tossed the frayed, seam-popped, stuffing-burst ragdoll into the bin with the broken furniture and char, perhaps assuming the damage came from the fire or the ensuing chaos. He'd snatched it before they could take him away with nothing but clothes too small and pictures obscured by soot, all gathered in a trash bag.

No one else could take him in, not his mother's mother in her resting home; not his father's sister, who lives in another country and resisted all attempts to reach her; not his cousin, in prison for at least five more years. So they dumped him with the rest of the discards, smelling of ash and days-old unwashed.

No one at the orphanage wants him, either. He took someone else's bed and stings sharp in their nose when they get too close, even though Sister Thomas scoured him with sponge like steel wool to relieve him of the fire. No amount of scrubbing could abrade the tragedy absorbed into clothes that no one will replace.



**Their little faces  
wrinkle and cringe  
with brief pain, and  
red that looks black in  
the dim light blooms  
on their pillows.**



Beneath the smoke, beneath the doll's musty scent—as though it was once stored in an attic with decaying books—Jeremy smelled his mother as she must have been at his age. It was the one thing that God and grown-ups could not take from him.

But the children could and did one winter morning, laughing as they snatched the ragdoll from his arms and tossed it into the fire meant to warm them. Jeremy burned his fingers trying to dig the doll from condemnation. He cried and screamed, and they laughed and laughed, because his misfortune was, for a while, worse than their own.

Sister Paul minds the burns but loses patience with his grief, which is cheap as nails, and at least he has his health and a place that feeds him, provides a roof over his head, and a fire to burn his fingers, when other children must go without.

“I'm sure you can find something else to play with on your own. Our children make do with rocks and sticks in the winter, grass and flowers in the spring. No use crying for something that won't resurrect from tears.” Sister Paul pats his head and gives him a forceful nudge toward the dining hall. “You aren't the only child here who suffers. Little boys shouldn't play with dolls anyway.”



His father and mother, in their own ways, taught him that there is little he cannot accomplish with a needle, thread, scissors, tape, glue, and imagination.

The rec room has scissors, but only the dull kind the sisters allow children to play with. The good scissors are in the kitchen. Needle and thread he finds in Sister Paul's office, in one of the desk drawers. She also has good tape and good glue, not just made for felt and construction paper.

In the middle of the dormitory, he places a single fat candle, lit from what's left of the evening fire smoldering to cold darkness. It's enough for his young eyes to see.

The children huddle their heat under threadbare blankets and quilts. He cuts a square out of each—not from the easy edges but at their feet, to let the ghosts of winter in, breath plumes in their wake.

Within the direct circle of candlelight, he lays out the patterned squares, cuts the rough outline of the front of a long-sleeved dress and a back to match, then stitches them together with black thread. From the plainer squares, he patchworks a bald head and blank face, a torso, two arms, two legs—limp and lifeless, without breadth or breath, although already it smells of candle smoke and reminds him of home.

He snips the eyes from Summer's teddy bear. She pushed Jeremy down every time

he tried to grab his mother's ragdoll before it was thrown in the fire. The teddy stares back sightlessly, tufts of stuffing in a soft explosion from the sockets. The eyes glimmer now on a no-longer-blank face, warm brown around the black pupil. His mother's eyes were brown.

For a long moment, he doesn't know what to use for a nose, but he soon remembers the shell necklace Lauren never takes off. Lauren held the ragdoll over the fire before tossing it to Paulie in a game of keep-away, although it hadn't been fun for Jeremy.

He snips the cowry off but wraps a bit of the leather cord around the pendant so he can sew it onto the face.

Paulie's baseball loses stitches and signed white hide to form the lips. Jeremy also takes one of his teeth, the one that wiggled during dinner and made the girls cringe when Paulie poked it out with his tongue, hanging by the thinnest fiber of flesh. It almost falls in his hand just by touching it.

Jeremy goes from bed to bed, checking teeth before the tooth fairy can take her share for pennies on enamel. When he finds a loose one, he ties a thread and yanks.

Their little faces wrinkle and cringe with brief pain, and red that looks black in the dim light blooms on their pillows. Some of them briefly stir, but their dreams are too deep, the worst of the pain too brief, and they eventually settle, the gleam of closed scissors in a closed fist trembling by their fogged sighs. The odd whimper here and there, perhaps, or a short cry, but bad dreams and toothaches are no strangers in orphanage nights.

He glues the stumpy teeth between the baseball skin. The original doll didn't show teeth in her smile, and his mother's wasn't quite like this, but it helps him remember hers, even though he's already lost her whistling in the woodshop, the sound of her voice when she taught him how to tie his shoes, the coolness of her fingers as she plastered a bandage on stinging wounds that felt like knife slashes at first but papercuts by the time she finished.

The scissors sing a song from bed to bed, easier cuts than through blankets. Locks fall like petals and leaves upon the stagnant lake of linoleum. Short hair gives body to fabric limbs; long hair fills the torso with unexpected softness. He stuffs the gaps with leftover fabric, stirring them in like comfort stew.

Summer and Lillian have the longest hair. Jeremy sews theirs bent double onto the head, knotting a makeshift wig in streaks of black and blonde. He attempts two braids on either side of her face, like the spring days his mother wore her dullest—

but somehow sweetest—clothes and dusted and polished the house from top to bottom while his father tended the winter-weeded landscape and cleaned out the hoard of the garage.

Lillian's grandmother's cameo brooch, Maddie's friendship bracelet, and Ana's chip earrings remind Jeremy of the nights that his mother dressed in her nicest dress and pearls that they never found in the wreckage, with shoes that made her seven feet tall to him, like a queen standing next to his father in a crisp black suit and black shoes that he taught Jeremy how to buff. Not that Jeremy's shoes, falling apart at the seams, need such loving treatment, and not even glue and a needle and thread can fix them, although he makes do with silver tape before he finishes his night craft.

Silver tape wrapped over the quilt and under the bed pin Lyle to his mattress, and more leftover blanket scraps taped over his mouth muffle screams under the pillow covering his head as Jeremy digs scissor tips underneath a fingernail.

Lyle was the last to hold the ragdoll. He brayed as he threw it into the fire, then kicked Jeremy in the abdomen when he tried to claw Lyle's eyes out, laughed even as the sisters dragged Jeremy out of the room to instruct him to turn the other cheek. Lyle is as big for his age as Jeremy is little, but he's no match for the tape now binding him into the tangle of blankets and sheets and cold chilling his blood.

Jeremy takes three fingernails from each of Lyle's hands and three toenails from each foot. With sobbing as ambient music, he glues the fingernails on the doll's feet like toenails and uses the more delicate nails for the hands. There's not enough room for a full set, but after using Cassie's red polish, they mimic his mother's after an impromptu beauty session in her bedroom. When he was even younger, she would let him dip the brush in the polish and paint her toes as messy as he wanted. He's more careful now, like she was.

Jeremy sews the head to the neck, then tests the ragged embrace.

He blows out the candle and holds the doll over the smoke as he matches her smile in the dark.



Wails and cries rise with the frigid dawn, meeting the shocked expressions of the sisters who come to tend the fire before waking the children. Hair and quilt scraps are strewn over the linoleum like sawdust among the blood drops of a killing room floor. Tears salt the shivering fruit of the earth as sorrows resurrect with absence—gouged holes in hearts, shreds of tough pride melting like candle wax among too

many ghosts.

Sister Paul finds Jeremy sleeping soundly, tucked against a ragdoll the size of the child himself. She can't bring herself to disturb such fragile peace, even to retrieve her good scissors clutched in a stained, needle-nicked hand.



# 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  
presents



**Danse Macabre**



**WRITTEN BY  
JULIA BIGGS**

I long for her; I yearn. Yet I have no wish to join the whirling dancers she keeps in her musical boxes.

I first see her, my dangerously beautiful and intoxicating countess, watching me in the gilded mirrors. Like a collage of splintered phantasms, she is looking at me with rapacious lust, her quick, bright eyes fixed upon my pale skin.

“How pleasing, how lovely,” she murmurs, her tone a curious mixture of melancholy, mockery, and relish. A capricious moon, she spills her light onto my face, casting an ambiguous spell. She motions me, indefatigable connoisseur that she is. “Come closer.”

Playing the modest, apprehensive ingénue, I quiver. *Shall I go to her?*

She appears unperturbed by my reluctance as she leans forward, moving her body against my taffeta finery, her fingernails dripping on my bare shoulders. I feel



**She bends, irresistibly,  
toward me and kisses  
my brow, her rouged  
lips leaving a mark of  
peril and promise.**

her hungry breath against my cheek as she whispers delicious, provocatively sweet, and abundant blandishments in my ear. Her words circle continuously in languid step with the proscribed tempo of a waltz.

A profound sense of strangeness begins to possess me, but I am far too curious, far too enthralled by the spectacle of my own seduction as I sway gleefully to the out-of-tune refrain.

The curtain rises. The ballet begins.



My removal to her castle, with its gloomy labyrinthine corridors woven from spider silk—so she says—is swift.

She tangles her lapidary fingers in my hair and assures me, her voice chillingly laconic, that exchanging the world of common-sense for one which works according to the laws of magic is a necessary exercise in sensual indulgence.

I blush. For a second, enchanted, I believe her.

I recover myself a little, though I tremble still, and sink into one of the sofas of faded crimson brocade that fill the claustrophobic confines of her old-fashioned boudoir. It is a realm of dust and dereliction.

Captivated by the white flounces of her antique crinoline, draped here and there with foaming lace, I contemplate my *dame blanche*, a mysterious spectral apparition luring me to dance with her in the red firelight. Hers is a special, ambivalent madness: she inhabits the air but her gestures are weighted, seemingly addressing the earth. She wantonly uses gravity, and she defies it. She looks wonderful but she looks obscene.

She raises a strangely joyous face to me as the shadow of one of her insouciant hands crawls across the round table covered in moth-ravaged velvet, a vermilion pool on which she has placed an inlaid wooden chest.

“Open it my darling,” she purrs, tapping the rosewood box.

Mistrustful, I glance at her, caught between complicity and rebellion, but her demands—or my latent cravings—are formidable. She breaks out in bitter laughter and scolds my delinquent imagination. Attempting to conceal my embarrassment, I quickly open the lid.

Bodies and faces fly out.

China dolls and contorted puppets spill into my lap, staring unseeing from gleaming glass eyes in sinisterly attractive, mute obedience. So many pliant faces and

endless eyelashes. Not content with this mimicry of the living, with this ‘singular statuary’—as her favorite poet says—I delve deeper into the grotesque treasure trove and uncover a bewildering array of silver, enamel, papier mâché, and polished walnut boxes.

“Ah,” she exclaims, “my *corps de ballet!* They should be made to go through their paces.”

She drops a bunch of delicate keys into my upturned palm.

“Promise me, my dear one, you will use each key on the ring. Unlock every box and play with them all,” she wryly implores, as if I am a pampered child that naturally needs to be indulged with miniature worlds as well as treats.

Keys, keys, keys, and music boxes that creak as I wind them, dislodging flakes of rust. A terrifying horde of sylphs, of hypnotic pirouetting ballerinas with wooden limbs, molded porcelain heads, fairytale golden hair and painted smiles, rise before me. Box after box exposes miraculous whizzing and rotating automata, dressed in fraying clouds of soft pink, cream, and gold.

These clockwork contrivances, my mechanical sisters, with their ugly viscera of cogs, wheels, springs, and plucked, ferocious metal teeth, churn out jangling tunes and emit a confusion of discordant cries. The fearful, desolate resonance of each ghostly twang throws me into somber delirium, and I fancy myself surrounded by the pumping machinery of a hundred brass hearts.

When the inhuman music slows and the shy notes separate themselves—finally mortified into silence—the light has faded, and she has halted before me.

Time is off its hinges.



She fastidiously wraps me in sumptuous layers of pleated snowy gauze, chiffon, and tulle. “My prima ballerina,” she says, her voice shifting from menace to enticing charm as she manipulates my limbs with the excruciating precision of a malign choreographer.

She has me dance *en pointe*, spin in low *arabesques*, and take to the air in a frantic crescendo of *cabrioles* and *grands jetés*. My body becomes wilder, increasingly distorted and depraved as she, my *belle dame sans merci*, pitilessly condemns me to keep dancing.

Exhausted, I find myself skittering across the rotting carpet, teetering on the brink and toppling into the suffocating, annihilating vehemence of her eyes.



Her roar of approbation is unexpected, and I feel a twinge of disgust imprinted with pleasure when I realize that I want her applause. I ache for her overwhelming, extravagant attention. I slip between partner and gift-wrapped plaything, to be marveled at and handled. *In this fizzling pageant of personae, who shall I disguise myself as?*

Her face, thickly coated with powder, splits in a triumphant grin, but if I peek behind her mask and graze its vulpine contours, will I find her only talent is that of gluttonous gazing?

How sad her eyes are, as though they are going to lapse into tears, as she bends, irresistibly, toward me and kisses my brow, her rouged lips leaving a mark of peril and promise. She swoons over and savages me, her mouth fastening on my throat with a thirsty eagerness, as if she will never let go.

“There! My hand...won’t you take hold of my hand?” she coaxes, lascivious. “Dance with me!”

Beguiled and breathless, I let her whirl us between the walls and into the patches of candlelight, before a slow legato melody overtakes us and a lusciously textured accompaniment—an oboe here, a viola there—leads our bodies into a mesmerizingly elegant rhythm.

In this extended, intimate *pas de deux*, our forms hover betwixt tenderness and great violence. I experience every exquisite, teasing nuance in my uncanny flesh, in its surfaces and crevices, as she teaches me one of her cruelest lessons.

All lovers are lethal.



I shiver as the last dulcet arpeggio dies away and I catch sight of the music box she is making for me.

She shows me how easy it would be to strip off my own skin and savor the sublimity of metamorphosis, to turn, harrowingly perfect, in my box among the other blank-faced girls.

Forcing my shriek back into my chest—of terror or delight, I can no longer tell the difference—I press hard on the precarious line between ominously brilliant, artificial movement and the improvised commotion of life.

Her monstrous paper-thin, cherry-cheeked marionettes set up a terrible clattering. I know that she cannot be bargained with, and that I am compelled to unfurl my next expansive performance, a bravura showpiece that will test my virtuosity. Maybe

I shall use my arms like daggers and my legs like scissors to bound through her nursery of eerie inventions.

I am myself now, full-bloodied, mischievous, malicious. To really feel the wicked, ghastly thrill of it all, I am ready to dance before my enraptured audience until everything unravels and reverts to dazzling chaos, all her passionate puppets dismembered.

I elbow plangent chords out of the way, as if ushering in a novel raucous cadence.

Perhaps this is the nihilistic bravado of the damned; and perhaps it is not.

I crash against the chest of toys and its lid snaps shut like a pair of jaws, trapping my co-devotees inside and eating them up.

Startled, she turns to me and seems oddly—absurdly—moved. Fascinated, almost awed, I watch her pivot between the glittering and the mournful, tilting like a diamond to refract new light from her facets of desire, decadence, and grief.

Playing implies that nothing real will leak from the game into life itself, but what if the rules of the game, with its myriad curios and its tumbling, masquerading, flitting and flirting, are flouted and it becomes foul play, not fair play?

“Oh, my little love, playing makes things happen,” she says, as if reading my thoughts.

I nod and lick my lips.



The light of dawn fills the decaying room, and an unruly, perverse musical box starts up again as she comes within my twirling orbit. The viscous quality to my steps leaves her unmoored and she drifts this way and that.

I cut her strings and, with the supplest grace, I sinuously wind about her like a satin shroud as she drops to the ground, her limp limbs jerking. I scoop her up and embrace her.

The flesh of my doll is warm to the touch.



# Julia Biggs



Julia Biggs is a freelance art historian and lecturer. She lives in Cambridge, UK.

Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Versification*, *Words & Whispers*, *Not Deer Magazine* and *Hungry Ghost Magazine*.

Her current research explores haunting seascapes, the culinary uncanny and the delicious excesses of the Gothic mode.



## THE TOY BOX COMES FOR ME

Now I lay me down to sleep  
knowing the toy box will come for me  
with its inhabitants, posed hands all brave with fantasy  
all smiles, all ring around the rosy cheeks,  
stars, galaxies  
painted in their eyes for me  
crooning lullabies to set my hellions free  
from all the serious, sage, sober, sensible society  
reminding of a time before time was remembered  
before the counting of dreary, doomed,  
and damned Decembers  
I am limb by limb dismembered  
insides spooned out like rhubarb pie  
all sight and thought and tongue consumed  
no room for any of those unsavory, somber things  
scooped sockets making space for glimmering  
button eyes  
the kind that never cry  
for illustrated grin  
unblemished, untouched skin, the kind  
that witnesses no evil  
I leave it all behind with them  
my entourage of merry manufactured friends  
I lay me down to sleep  
knowing the toy box comes for me  
to set me free

A.L. GARCIA



THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# The Tea Party



**WRITTEN BY  
C.M. FINCH**

Allison was bored. This was obvious and not just because Allison was bored quite often. The perils of a ten-year-old mind wise beyond her years, is what she told her companions. She tried not to think of how often she had used that line recently, but the fact it was near rote was evidence enough.

Florence gazed down at the girl and did her best to remain stern. The little imp looked so much like her at that age, with her dress of fine flowered fabric falling neatly to her simple leather shoes, and dark hair trying its best to escape the carefully braided bun. Eliza had clearly worked hard to get the child into a presentable condition as even the ribbons remained tied tightly and there was nary a snag in her stockings or skirts. The poor maid deserved extra compensation for such a task.

A glance showed that Allison's usual shadow was nowhere to be seen. It was a Thursday, and not yet Eliza's day off, which meant this was unusual. Another



**I want a tea party and I  
want to play! You said I  
can have what I want!  
You said we are better  
than them and will  
always get what we want!**

glance provided a clue to the missing woman's location. There was a knowing gleam to Allison's green eyes, an expression far too innocent to be true.

"Darling, where is Miss Eliza?" Florence asked. She had her suspicions, but it was best not to jump to conclusions. *Bait and wait*, her grandmother would tell her time and time again. You received far more damning evidence with the direct approach, at least with certain types.

Unlike Florence herself, patience was not one of Allison's strengths. Hubris, yes, but not patience. A sly smile spread across those tiny little lips when she replied, "I wanted a tea party but Miss Eliza told me that my dollies and toys needed a rest. I told her to go find me one that didn't."

She would not show weakness, but a hint of her exasperation shone through when she asked, "Did you, or did you not, lock Miss Eliza in your toy box again?" It was less of a box and more of an entire room, but the matter stood that one did not lock one's maid away. A loyal worker was difficult to find. A loyal worker willing to work with a child such as Allison was more difficult still.

There was a flicker, the slightest change in expression from smile to sneer and back again, before Allison replied, "I told her she could be one of the guests if she couldn't find one suitable and she told me she didn't know how. She can learn by the others' examples this way."

"Robert," she snapped before she calmed herself once more. It did not take long for the man to appear, which meant he had been lurking with the desire to avoid involvement.

As expected, he attempted to feign ignorance to all that had transpired. At the slight narrowing of her own green eyes, he relented, even dipping his head in recognition of her authority.

"You shall handle her punishment and ensure she remains in the room this time, then return to assist me in cleaning up this mess," she said. He looked uncertain for the briefest of moments, before he gathered his resolve and nodded. She knew he was tempted to go easy on the child, so she opened her locket and removed the silver key within. "The manacles are in the chest outside the tower door. You may choose if you wish to leave the window open or not."

He nodded once more, but anything he may have said was drowned out by the wails and thrashing of the child before her. "No," she screamed. "I want a tea party and I want to play! You said I can have what I want! You said we are better than them and will always get what we want!"

To her surprise, Robert removed his neckerchief and made a makeshift gag with quick and precise movements. Allison was not completely silenced, and her tiny little fangs dug into the silk as though she could rend it by will alone, but Florence heard him when he promised, “I will take care of this and I agree, fresh air and perhaps a tiny crack of sunlight may do the child well. Eliza has been nothing but loyal and this behavior is unacceptable.”

Allison’s muffled protests became more of a yelp at that.

Florence used the opportunity to rub it in. “I did warn you that turning one so young would have its consequences.”

“You are, as always, correct, my liege,” he intoned, again bowing his head. He was likely worried she would punish him for his child’s insolence. She would not dissuade him of that belief. He scooped up the still-thrashing child—fine skirts and bows and all—with ease. As he disappeared down the long hallway, she heard him explain with a calmness only partially forced, about his own punishments in the early days after his turning. Allison held his blood as sure as he held Florence’s own. To assume all rules would be adhered to and obedience was ingrained would be folly.

With that at least partially handled, Florence left to see if anything could be salvaged, be it the undoubted state of the toy box or their relationship with Eliza.

Allison’s usual chambers were not nearly as dreadful as she had feared. The bedding was in order, and the porcelain dolls tucked in their usual spaces, save for the one Allison had named Nelly, who was seated at the small table, awaiting the tea party that was not to be. The cabinet that held the play set was slightly ajar, as was the armoire.

She paused just outside the closet, nose twitching in anticipation of what she would find. She slid each lock, one by one, and opened the door with a note to have the creaking hinges oiled. A small candle in a holder sat near the door, barely visible in the dank and dim light that barely trickled in from the bedchamber. She lit it and mused that at least Allison had not been foolish enough to leave it burning and likely cost her the room, if not the estate, with her carelessness.

The candle was less for Florence and more for the room’s occupants. This way, they would know it was the mistress of the house and not the child who saw to their treatment. She was certain that at least two beyond Eliza were still breathing, but their pulses were weak to even her trained ears.

She stepped into the closet and discovered that she was, once again, correct.

A woman near thirty was slumped in chains, a dark reddish brown staining her

pale skin and simple dress. Beside her, a child with features similar enough to be her offspring was in identical circumstances, save for a hair ribbon—of all things—wrapped about her wrist, as though that would staunch the flow from a tea party feeding. The stench and positioning of the others told her they were lost causes, as was the rug by the looks of it.

There, off to the right, was what she sought. Not chained but caged for now, sat the painfully loyal Eliza, rocking back and forth and swiping at her betraying tears. A patch around her was cleared of the worst of it, her once-white apron the source of that little miracle.

The light of the candle must have roused her from her stupor; she looked up as Florence approached. “I’m so sorry, ma’am,” she chattered. “I didn’t mean to be derelict in my duties. I should’ve noticed her toys were broken and informed you of the need for more.”

“Hush now, my dear,” Florence replied, putting more than a thread of calmness and serenity in her tone. The maid silenced immediately, eyes glazed over from far too many such experiences. “Allison is too rough on her playthings, and always has been. This is not your fault.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the young woman dully replied, all traces of fear vanquished. Subservience remained, but that was a preference and a right.

The lock to the cage was easy enough to break and she opened the steel door to review the state of things. At her command, Eliza rose, and Florence was pleased to find no apparent injuries beyond a tiny scrape and what could have been a bruise or a smear of the mess she had attempted to clean. All in all, it could have been far worse, and she rather appreciated the simplicity in opposition to her suspicions. Allison was, after all, still a child. A nearly thirty-seven-year-old child, but her mind and body remained young, even if her memories grew faster than she ever would.

“Please, let me assist you in clearing the toys,” Eliza said.

Florence was tempted—the maid’s dress was already in quite a state—but she relented instead and said, “Robert will assist me. Please, go wash and enjoy a night off. I am certain Mary would appreciate help in the kitchens tomorrow once you are rested. Your charge will be unavailable for at least a day or two. Though, please, do let me know if any new toys catch your eye on your day off this weekend? You do have such immaculate taste.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Eliza nodded before she scampered off.

Robert arrived with Reginald and Phillip in tow, and the trio made short work of



emptying the toy box of its bits and pieces, and scrubbing clean the room itself.

Florence felt the need to verify that Robert had not gone easy on his child, and realized dear Allison must have crossed a line even Robert held; she was quite secured in the tower room, shutters letting only a fine light of the rising sun creep across the floor.

Before returning to her own suite, Florence indulged in one petty little thing. Well, technically two if you counted the miniature tea party of her own while she waited for Robert. She opened the door to Allison's temporary abode and placed her prize within.

While she had been tempted to crush the fine porcelain, she settled for placing the head of dear Nelly on the window sill instead. Eliza could fix the toy, but Florence would employ Robert in convincing the child she needed quite the apology to do so.

That settled, she retired until evening came around once more. Though she too missed the days of dolls and playthings, she had a household to run. She licked the taste of her self-forbidden snack from her teeth and hoped to dream of times when she had tea parties of her own.



# C.M. Finch



**C. M. Finch is an author, occasional artist, and a parental figure to both humans and fur babies. She accepts she/her as well as they/them pronouns.**

**She has written for the CONvergence Science Fiction convention for several years and serves as a co-head on their convention committee. When not working the paying gig, you can find her either taking far too many pictures of state forests or perusing more books than she will totally read some day, for real.**

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THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# Marble Run



WRITTEN BY  
ANNA ORRIDGE

Neale wasn't satisfied with the usual run of urban exploration any longer. The disused military sites, bunkers, and tube stations had entertained him for a while but now, they were all much of a muchness. It wasn't a challenge, prising the boards from the door of one more old church in the early hours of the morning.

One thing still gave him that rush, the near-delirium of transgression he craved: pre-demolition sites. The closer to the day of destruction the better. There was nothing quite like the knowledge that his steps would be the last to echo down an abandoned corridor, his the last breath to leave its opaque bloom on a cracked hospital window.

A fellow explorer had alerted him to the site in question, a block of residential flats at the edge of an estate he'd never heard of in East London.

Neale turned up early, just after six o'clock, when the commuters would be far



It seemed  
impossible for a  
single marble to  
make such a  
cacophony.

too busy dashing to work to pay much attention to him or his toolkit.

Almost as soon as he saw that block of flats, though, he knew there was something off about it. For a start, it was so far from everything else. The nearest road was at least five hundred feet away, and the other blocks further still. It was also quite a different design. In its essence, it was a rather squat grey cube. But the stairwells were outside the building, looping round and out, like a giant play castle for kids, with chutes and slides jutting out at odd angles.

It didn't put Neale off, though. In fact, if anything, it excited him. The building would be a challenge to get around, a maze for him to conquer.

Pre-demolition places were usually more difficult to break into, what with the added security. More chains, more locks, and sometimes guards patrolling in the final twenty four hours before the blast. But they'd not done much other than a half-arsed effort with barrier tape and signs. All Neale had to do to get in was crawl under a hole under a fence.

He made his way through a carpet of trash, nettles, and thistles, hacking away with his crow bar. He was surprised to find no boards or bars on the doors. He took his hammer to the padlock of a backdoor and got in with a fair degree of ease before wandering the lower floors for a time.

The predictable layout of the corridors disappointed him. Linoleum floors, walls whitewashed but with inevitable scuffs. The only strange thing was the lack of explosives and cables. With a demolition so close, the walls should have been lined with them, like veins protruding from elderly wrists.

But there was nothing. Perhaps it was all concealed in a basement.

Neale found a stairwell and went up to the first floor. But the floor plan was pretty much the same. He kicked an abandoned, rusting chair in frustration, stubbing his toe and swearing.

As he turned to leave, still grumbling in disgust, he noticed an open door, shedding light on strange markings on the walls of a flat.

It was not, of course, unusual for him to find graffiti on the walls of abandoned buildings. Forgotten places were often tagged, along with the scattering of nitrous oxide canisters and beer bottles, the stench of stale urine mingling with that of alcohol.

But this was just weird. For a start, it looked as though it was done with a Sharpie rather than spray paint. An arrangement of fine black lines slotted into one another, like a circuit board. So intricate, it covered all the walls.

Tracing a line with a finger, Neale followed it down the hall of the flat. The design covered the door as well as the floors.

He came to what was once a living room, where the markings abruptly stopped.

Something on the floor claimed his attention instead. Parts of a marble run were strewn across the old boards, alongside a dozen cat's eye marbles.

Neale gasped and laughed. He had loved marble runs as a kid. His mum had bought him several sets and he used to build great castles, running the marbles all at the same time. Bloody racket it used to make. Dad would often kick it down just to make him do something else.

But this one was nothing like the brightly coloured plastic sets of his childhood.

It looked like a DIY upcycling project—lots of odd bits of metal and ceramic and wood smoothed down to make twisting chutes and spinning wheels and such like.

It was still irresistible.

Neale kneeled and started putting the set together. The pieces didn't all connect, so it was more like a jigsaw puzzle than a normal marble run. It was tricky, but he found himself entirely absorbed. Once he had assembled it, he sat back, allowing himself a sigh of satisfaction. It was a cube, but with lots of odd swirling chutes around it.

Viewed from above, it was impressively intricate, reminiscent of the innards of an old clockwork watch. Neale picked up one of the cat's eye marbles and dropped it into an obsidian chute protruding from the cube, like a long black tongue.

The marble rolled through water wheels on the sides and disappeared back into the cube. It clattered and clinked, sounding like a Newton's Cradle on fast forward. It seemed impossible for a single marble to make such a cacophony. Through the top, he caught flashes of it as it shot from chute to chute, but they were very brief.

After a few minutes, he became unsettled.

The longer he stared, the less it looked like a clock, and the more it looked like op art. He remembered one painting of a staircase with various impossible perspectives, forcing the eye to follow round and round until one felt dizzy and sick.

The marble continued to spin and hurtle down chutes. Neale wanted to pluck the thing out, but his fingers were heavy, splayed on the floor.

His knees started to ache and the chill settled deep.

He was motionless, but his thoughts shuttled like the marble.

How was the thing still going? Was the marble run a perpetual motion machine? Wasn't that supposed to be physically impossible? If he hadn't assembled it himself,

he would've assumed it had a mechanism.

Only the light from the broken window, drawing its way back across the floor, gave him any sense of time passing. It was evening; he'd been there for hours.

In the distance, an owl hooted, and something rustled in the trees. The night sounds broke the trance.

He pried his fingers off the ground, yelping with pain. As he did, the marble dropped into a well at the bottom of the cube.

It quivered, staring up at him with its vivid green swirl.

Neale convulsed. He fell over, clutching his legs in the foetal position. The owl was still hooting outside. As feeling returned slowly to Neale's limbs, he rubbed his arms in an effort to bring back warmth and suppleness.

Eventually, he unfurled and crawled towards the door. "What the fuck...what the fuck is this?" He could barely croak out the words, his tongue dry after hours of silence.

There was rumbling then, from outside the building.

The rumble of a lorry, not dying away but growing louder.

Neale whimpered.

No, that was impossible. The engineers would've sent somebody for a final check. They always did.

But the rumbling was getting louder, so loud he could barely think. He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head, trembling in fear, crawling forwards nonetheless.

He managed to get up and stumble through the doorway and into the hall, but he couldn't remember which direction he'd come from. Both ways, a long stretch of whitewashed walls, interrupted only by padlocked doors that slid towards a void. Neale stumbled to the left, where there seemed to be at least a glint of light in the distance.

The rumbling was as encompassing as the darkness that swallowed him as he ran.

He did not look up in time to save himself. Nowhere near. But as he caught the flash of twirling green in the great globe hurling towards him, he had enough time to realise the light at the end of a tunnel is not always a symbol of hope.



# Anna Orridge



**Anna Orridge holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia.**

**Her short horror fiction has appeared in Mslexia, Ghost Orchid Press and Gothic Nature Journal. Her essay for Off Limits Press anthology 'Divergent Terror' is due to come out in 2023. She also is the winner of the #micropoem21 and 'Hot Poets' competitions. She lives in Croydon with her family, and her day job is in education and sustainability.**

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## DEVIL IN THE BOX

Turn the crank  
The music plays  
And then you'll  
Set her free  
The clown inside  
That used to hide  
Pops!  
She gives a fright  
Time for fun  
You better run  
The games are hers  
Not yours  
Children beware  
Of the circus fare  
The grinding of the gears  
For the Devil's in the box

**J.S. LARMORE**



THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# Twenty-Six Steps



WRITTEN BY  
L.V. RUSSELL

Melody Grace could easily count the number of steps it took to reach her bedroom from the sitting room. Could hear the soft groan of the eighth step, hear the gentle swish of her mother's nightgown over the wood. She waited in the darkness, her nightlight a wisp of smoke, an echo of light and nothing more. In that solid darkness, her mother would come, candle in hand, to settle on Melody Grace's bed.

"What is it now, darling?"

"He was here again." Melody pointed to the corner of her room, a spot where the candlelight could not quite reach. "I saw him."

Her mother stood and walked into the dark, raising the candle so it caught all corners of the child's bedroom.

Nothing stood in the shadows, nothing lingered. Nothing watched.

"The dark can sometimes feel frightening, it can play tricks on our minds and



**And there it was,  
propped upon her  
pillow, amber-eyed  
and calmly  
watching.**

make us see things that are not really there. It cannot harm us.”

“I am not afraid of the dark,” Melody Grace answered, turning from the wavering candlelight to meet her mother’s gentle blue eyes. “I fear what hides in it.”

“I fear you have too much imagination for your own good darling, and look, you dropped this.” Her mother bent low to pluck a teddy bear from the floor, drawing it close to her chest. “He will keep a careful watch over you.”

The bear was placed with care upon Melody Grace’s pillow, its jointed legs stretched outward, its arms by its side. The candlelight flickered over its glass eyes, the amber darkening for just a moment to crimson.

The light retreated with her mother’s soft steps, the sighing of her nightgown fading, the twenty-six steps down the corridor and down the stairs, growing fainter and fainter until there was only silence.

Moonlight cast its glow through the window, piercing through the thin veil of linen held against the glass. It did little for the dark, instead catching the edges of the shadows, making them dance.

With her eyes fixed on the far corner of her room, Melody Grace pulled the covers high around her. She had seen him each night, stretching out from the shadows, pulling more and more of the darkness inward, until he loomed over her, limbs long and thin, mouth an abyss.

And how she had screamed, Melody Grace, and counted in hushed whispers the steps, the twenty-six steps it took for her mother to reach her.

But the shadows remained still. The darkness unmoving. The unlit corner of her room stoic.

She felt it first at her neck, the brush of claws, cold and sharp. They reached beneath her covers, scraping them down and down until they pooled over the bed and onto the floor. Fear had its own taste, Melody Grace discovered, and it was ashen and cloying. It stuck in her throat, barring her breaths until she was sure she would choke.

Her breath strained, her mouth full of fear, Melody Grace turned.

And there it was, propped upon her pillow, amber-eyed and calmly watching.

The bear sat above her head, golden fur threadbare in places, stitches at its side weak so stuffing leaked from its seams. The abyss from it too, seeping into the mattress, thick as oil and dark as blood.

Melody Grace stared at the stuffed bear, and it stared back, unmoving, as it should be. She knew it was there though, held behind the cotton, hidden between the wood

shavings stuffed within. She had no name for it, and she would never give it one, but it knew hers.

*“Melody Grace.”* The voice drifted from stitched lips, the thread straining with the weight of the words. *“Come play with me, Melody Grace.”*

But she wouldn't.

With a small hand, Melody Grace snatched the bear from her pillow and tossed it back into the dark.

And in the dark, it grew.

Stretching up and out and over the walls of her bedroom, consuming the shadows left behind by the moonlight, it poured from the torn stitches, crawling from a ripped and gaping maw until it was everywhere.

Her screams fled past her fear-choked throat, her voice carrying out over the ravaged echoes of her name. She could not move, held down by the darkness or the terror slicing through her, she did not know. It was as though her body was not her own and she could not will it to obey.

“Mother,” she cried out, listening for that first footstep, the creak of the eighth.

The glow of candlelight shattered the dark.

Melody Grace's mother stepped into the room, settling down upon the bed with a heavy sigh. Before she spoke, she waved the candle so its light danced across the corners of the room, leaving no shadow unsearched. The room was quiet and empty, lit by the flame and soft moonbeams. Everything was as it should be, save for the discarded teddy bear, its limbs askew and stuffing over the rug.

“If you cannot look after your toys, darling, I will have to take them away.” Her mother plucked the bear from the floor and tucked it beneath her arm. “You need to go to sleep, or you will be absolutely rotten in the morning.”

Melody Grace fixed her gaze on the bear, its body limp, eyes downcast. Pieces of sawdust fluttered down from the holes in the stitches, settling on the bedcovers like confetti.

“I will, Mother,” she answered, drawing back into the pillows. “Would you light my candle, please? Just for tonight?”

Her mother thought for a moment, noting the rumpled covers on the floor. “Just for tonight, darling, if you promise not to throw your blankets or your toys. I will not have you burn this house down.”

“I will be very careful.”

With a fond smile, her mother lit the candle on her bedside table. She pulled the

blankets from the floor and tucked her daughter in tight, and with a kiss to her brow, she bade her goodnight.

The sounds of her mother faded from earshot, the creak of the eighth step slipping back into the dark. The candle bathed everything in a soft light, the shadows calm and still. The whisper of her name was near forgotten.

Melody Grace swept a hand over her blankets, sending the pieces of sawdust to the floor. She paused over a larger fleck, plucking it up to take a closer look. Black stained the edges, thin veins of it spreading inward. It did not smell like her toys, like her dolls and the line of soft rabbits that sat on her windowsill. They had soaked up the scent of the house, the fragrance of the dried lavender her mother liked to keep, they smelled of Melody Grace's soap.

The shaving in her hand smelled of the old shed at the bottom of the garden, of old damp wood and the rat traps the gardener had left unchecked for too long. It was rot and slow death.

With a quicker swipe, Melody Grace dashed the rest of the sawdust from her bed covers, dislodging the little black beads concealed beneath them. There were legs on those beads, thin and spindly and the half-ravaged remains of iridescent wings. Countless miniature bodies lay unearthed beneath the sawdust, and the flakes began to squirm and undulate, pulsing out as another set of legs emerged from under it. More legs, eight legs and out it stretched, huge and swollen and hungry.

Melody Grace's fear tasted of dirt and bile, an oleaginous lump of dread. It was so strong, so heavy, she could make no sound around it. It tightened around her throat, allowing one small rasp and nothing more.

And her mother came, candle in hand to banish the shadows, the darkness, the nightmares as she always had, as mothers tended to do. She stood in the doorway, moonlight catching the perfect white silk of her nightgown. And the fear in Melody Grace's throat eased a little, the taste of ashes slipping away from her tongue.

*"Melody Grace,"* her mother sang, hand limp at her side, fingers curled bone-tight around the arm of her bear. The shadows stretched, on and on and on without end, reaching high above the bed, yawning open as though to swallow her whole. *"Melody Grace."*

Her mother's nightgown did not sigh over the floorboards, the eighth step had remained silent. She had not counted the twenty-six steps it took for her mother to reach her bedroom from the sitting room.

All had been silent save for the scratching call of her name.

From her mother's arm, the bear hung, head tilted, stitches spilling out the desiccated husks of botflies, and her mother held it close, as though it were a precious thing. She looked down at Melody Grace with eyes bleach white, lips pale and blue and cracked. She stepped closer, feet dragging, slow and terrible, her hand outstretched. Her smile cracked, edges bleeding thin trails of black.

*"Melody Grace, come play with us, Melody Grace."*



# L.V. Russell



L.V. Russell grew up in an old, haunted cottage on the site of an old plague village, and as children, she and her brothers would play on what she recently found out was an ancient barrow.

She has seen ghosts and faeries and loves nothing more than allowing them to haunt her writing. She is the author of *The Quiet Stillness of Empty Houses* and *The Wicked Woods Chronicles*. When not writing, she spends her days reading and crafting, and slowly painting all the walls in her house black.

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THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# The Vanishing Blocks



**WRITTEN BY  
NEWTON**

Scott watched quietly from the hallway as his four-year old son, Justin, sat amidst a pile of wooden blocks in his room. The boy, oblivious to the observation, hummed to himself as he stacked block upon block in different formations, only to then second-guess his arrangement, tear them down, and start all over again. The four-inch wooden cubes had a letter or symbol intricately carved into each side. Scott noted an A, an O, and a Z along with what appeared to be birds, crabs, and cats. There was a peaceful simplicity to the child's process that he couldn't help but appreciate: build, tear down, rebuild, tear down, repeat.

"Hey, hon? Who got him those blocks?" Scott asked as he sauntered into the kitchen.

"I can't remember," his wife, Leslie, replied as she hovered over a pot of pasta. "Did your mom get them? Whoever it was, I owe them a Thank You card. He's



**Consecrated in  
callouses, their craft  
was their creed, their  
scars their sacrifices,  
their routines their  
rituals...**

been absolutely obsessed with them all day. I swear, it's the quietest he's been in weeks."

Scott thought for a moment, pondering over the ups, downs, ins, and outs of Justin's fourth birthday party a week ago. It had been a well-attended—albeit chaotic—event that culminated with a hoard of toys scattered about the living room. Still, he couldn't recall seeing those blocks. "No, my mom got him the airplane, remember? She said she hoped we could all get on one soon and visit her down in Florida."

"Oh, that's right," Leslie said, still preoccupied with the pasta.

"So then where did they come from?" he asked.

"I don't know, honey. They're definitely new. Had to be from the party."

Scott wandered back down the hall. Justin, still unaware of being watched, had taken on a more serious expression as he stacked the blocks in a circle, forming a silo around himself. He thoroughly evaluated and inspected each block before gingerly setting them into place. The boy no longer hummed, too fixated on the cubes.



*Huddled against the driving winds and pouring rain, the Carvers fashioned timber and bone into totems possessed of raw, genuine power. The so-called pioneers had pushed and shoved, taking too much, leaving too little. But the forests were deep and damp and dark, and they ranged far beyond the reach of the absurdly rich, the always hungry. In hidden hollows and well-concealed canopies, the delicate inner mechanisms of The Reconstruction were painstakingly shaven, shaped, and shipped. Consecrated in callouses, their craft was their creed, their scars their sacrifices, their routines their rituals...*



"He's acting kind of...odd," Scott whispered as he fished another beer from the bottom of the fridge.

"Why? Because he's playing with his toys and behaving?" Leslie whispered back as she stirred the sauce.

"You know what I mean. He's barely said a word since I got home. It's not like him."

"Trust me, he's fine," she said. "Some days are just like this. He gets wrapped up in something and then he's off in his own little world for hours on end. Other days, he's attached to my hip the entire time. Three weeks ago, he grabbed the toilet brush out



of the bathroom and challenged me to a duel, like it was a sword or something.”

Scott chuckled. “That’s gross. Although it is pretty imaginative.”

“Yes, very creative. But it took thirty minutes of arguing to convince him to put the poopy sword back in the bathroom where it belongs. See all the fun you miss while you’re at work? You should go see if he needs any help. Dinner will be ready in ten minutes.”

“Good idea.”

Scott walked to his son’s room and poked his head in. The ring of blocks had been undone and reassembled into a grid that covered most of the floor. Justin stood over the arrangement looking positively perplexed. “How’s it going, bud?” Scott asked.

“Okay,” the boy replied without looking up from the wooden network. “I’m starting to get it.”

“It looks to me like you’re doing great.” Scott picked up one of the blocks. “You need some help? We could build a fort or something.”

“No,” Justin screeched, “don’t touch it!”

Shocked by the sudden outburst, Scott scolded the boy. “Excuse me? You don’t scream at people that way. That wasn’t very nice at all. What do you say?”

“I’m sorry,” Justin said quietly, a frown creasing his brow.

“Get this room picked up and wash your hands. Dinner’s almost ready.”



*Spurred by the sting of the lash at their backs, the Masons molded sand, stone, and clay into monuments that would withstand the truest of all tests: Time. They dutifully bowed before whatever Pharaoh, King, or Conqueror commanded them at the time, yet smiled knowingly to each other, backs bent and muscles strained. Rulers were ridiculous and their reigns were brief. A temple or tower to placate someone’s oversized self-worth was a small price to pay to continue their pursuit of The Reconstruction unnoticed. Consecrated in sweat, their labor was their love, their toil their devotion, their work their worship...*



Annoyed, Scott returned to the kitchen. Leslie was setting plates and silverware about the table.

It suddenly occurred to him how very tired she looked. “I’m sorry I’ve been working so much,” he said. “I’m going to try and be home more. For both of you. For

all of us.”

“I wasn’t trying to make you feel guilty or—”

“No, no, I didn’t think you were,” he said calmly. “It’s just... I just feel like I’m missing out on spending time with him. Like maybe he’s missing out as well. I haven’t been here enough lately.”

“Well, you won’t hear me complain. I think that might do us all some good.”

“I’ll talk to Dan tomorrow about scheduling some vacation time,” he said. “Maybe we really could fly down to Florida and see my mom for a week.”

“You won’t hear me complain about that either.” Leslie grinned. “And we really do need to figure out who got him those blocks and send them a Thank You note. They’ve been a big hit.”

“No doubt. He just screamed at me when I tried to touch them.”



*With aching eyes and arthritic fingers, the Designers worked tirelessly to refashion that which had been lost. The weight of their colossal task, reverse-engineering the Eternal, was as much a sacred blessing as it was a burden and curse. Whether perched upon the perilous scaffolding hovering above its ears or marching along the mezzanines that led under its neck, they directed the ebbs and flows around The Reconstruction. Architects of the absurd, they were sanctified by schematics, their methods their madness, their formations their faith...*



As Leslie spooned spaghetti onto their plates, Scott poured them each a glass of wine. The tensions that had plagued them the past few weeks had abated. A sense of unspoken optimism bloomed within their small apartment kitchen.

“Can you go get Justin?” she asked. “Make sure he’s washed up.”

“Will do.”

Justin’s door was shut. Closed doors were against family rules. Annoyance bubbled into anger as Scott whipped the door open.

The blocks, no longer a geometric grid upon the floor, had been reconfigured into a doorway on the opposite wall. Each cube glowed faintly, an assortment of red, blue, amber, and green, the colors illuminating the carvings adorning each face. A portal had been opened within the wooden framework; a passageway to a world of unbridled industrial chaos. Although no sound broke through the barrier, Scott saw

enormous interlocking gears slowly grinding against each other, and leaky steam pipes coursing like veins riveted against a backdrop of concrete and rust.

Justin had already entered the portal. The boy stood on a metal grate just inside the mysterious landscape. Awestruck, he stood frozen, mouth agape and eyes wandering.

In a panic, Scott lunged forward, intent on grabbing his son and yanking him back into reality. But before he could reach him, the eerie glowing in the blocks flickered and died.

The entryway to the unknown vanished, leaving only the unassuming wall of the apartment bedroom.

The wooden cubes smoked and stank of burning oil as Scott screamed in anguish.



*For the first time in many cycles, a gateway had been unlocked and an apprentice, short in stature but keen on insight, had been added to the ranks of the Designers. The Priests, adorned in their copper masks and soft red silks, enthusiastically declared the event a victory, confirmation that their collective efforts were not in vain.*

*As the good news spread throughout The Reconstruction, the Anchormen rattled their massive chains in celebration, while the Proletarians, unmoved by much of anything, continued to simply shovel. In keeping with their station, The Revolutionists, unruly beasts fashioned mostly of feathers, fangs, and baling wire, spun in slow-moving circles overhead, as they always had.*



# Newton



Currently residing in St. Louis, MO, Newton is an author, artist, and oddity who spends an inordinate amount of time scouring the depths of his overactive imagination in an effort to dredge up original works of wonder and terror.


His short story, *A Cold Room*, can be found in *Eros & Thanatos: An Anthology of Death & Desire*. His other published works can be found via Amazon under the mononym 'Newton'.

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Tales of  
Toys and Terror

# Rotting Dreams

WRITTEN BY  
KATHLEEN PALM



The dollhouse lights glow from the corner of my room.  
Lights that shouldn't work.  
Uncovering it yesterday must have stirred memories, because I dreamed  
about my old dollhouse. Flickering lights. Rotting furniture. I woke up  
when the dolls started screaming.  
And like in the dream, the lights sputtered on.  
I crawl forward, my bed squeaking.  
Dreams. I poured so many into that stupid toy.  
With a sigh, I move to huddle back under my blankets when a shadow  
twitches in a miniscule window. Then another.  
Something whispers.  
*I wish...*

The pink door creaks opens. I stiffen, but lean closer.  
Hundreds of tiny, blackened arms erupt from the void, wrapping around  
the door frame and clawing at the dusty white siding.  
Raspy voices scurry through my room.

*I wish...*

*I want...*

*Please...*

Crooked shadows creep across my walls as what sounds like a million tiny  
feet slap on my wood floor.

*Tip. Tap. Skitter. Tap.*

Louder and closer.

I back against the headboard. Doll-like things crawl onto my bed.

Shoulders jerk. Twisted heads nod. Eyes cry dark tears. And they whisper.

*I wish...*

*...a house...*

*...a family...*

*...to be happy...*

Words I repeated many times. My dreams that never came true. Dreams I  
abandoned in that house when I covered it and forgot it.

A horde of little beings creeps over my bed.

I shriek as pointed fingers sink into my feet, my legs...my stomach.

My forgotten dreams didn't die.

They rotted. They warped. They waited.



# Kathleen Palm



Kathleen Palm haunts her 100 year old farmhouse in rural Indiana, where she resists the urge to run through the killer-infested cornfields. About eighteen years ago, her husband and two kids watched as she started writing, her words tumbling into the dark and creepy land of horror. Surrounded by four cats and two dogs, she survives in her living room absorbed in anything scary or weird and plotting how to spread light through the darkness. Several of her short stories have been published, most recently “My Abby” in the anthology *Blackberry Blood* and “The Door to Other Places” in *A Quaint and Curious Volume of Gothic Tales*.

Twitter: @KathleenPalm  
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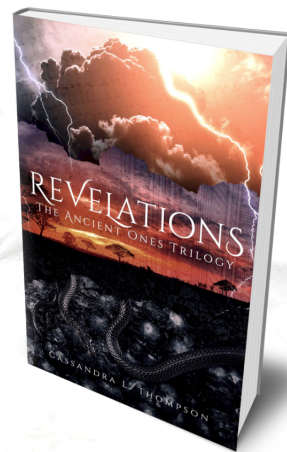
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# SUBMISSIONS

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 *Midwinter Despair* 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?

Head to our website for the submission guidelines on poetry. We're proud to offer payment for chosen poems that hit our monthly themes!

Sincerely, from Quill & Crow's Associate Editor,

*L.R. Wieland*



# TRIGGER INDEX

- **Child death**  
mentioned.....*The Tea Party*
- **Child violence (against other children)**  
mentioned.....*Ragged*
- **Vampirism**  
implied.....*The Tea Party*

# 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 to make good on the bright future you helped make possible for us.

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