

The Crow's Quill

SEPTEMBER 2023

SHAPESHIFTERS

TALES OF GOTHIC DELIGHT

Explore grief, love,
self-empowerment,
and much more in
these four stories
about shapeshifters.

*Poetry
Interludes*

Embrace the power
of shapeshifting in
two exclusive
poems.

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.


Quill & Crow

CONTENT DISCLAIMER

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

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

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

Yours,



ABOUT THE HOUSE

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

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

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

...and we will probably feed you.



FROM THE EDITOR

Dearest dark hearts,

I suspect we've all had times when we wished we could transform into someone else. Maybe we wished it to escape our realities, or maybe we wished it because we simply wanted something *more*. Whatever the case, the *Shapeshifters* theme seemed like a perfect one to close out the last month of summer before it transforms into fall.

This issue delves into tales about coping with grief and rejection, trusting your instincts, and embracing your power through transformation into something else...

Into something *more*.

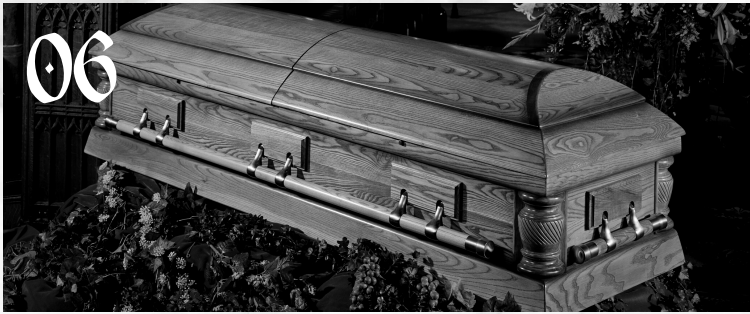
Yours,



Damon Barret Roe

Assistant Editor

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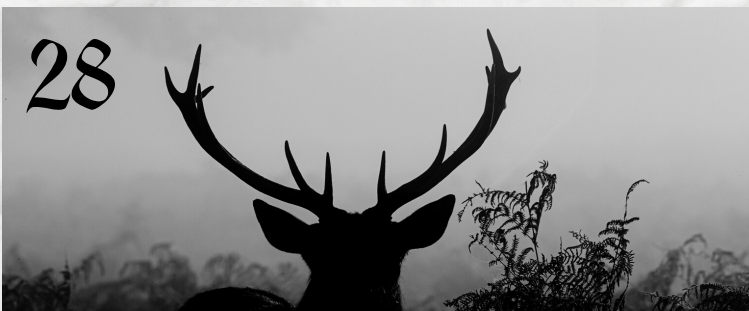
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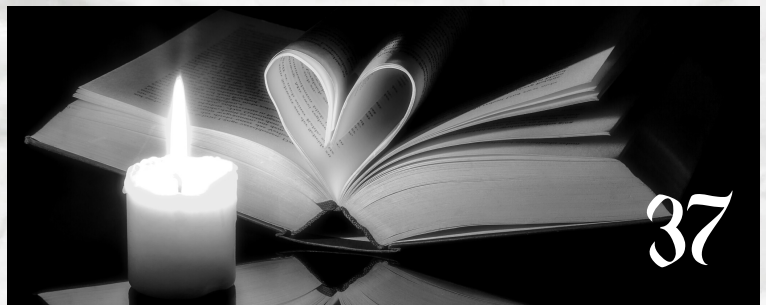
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presents



The Darkest Part of the River

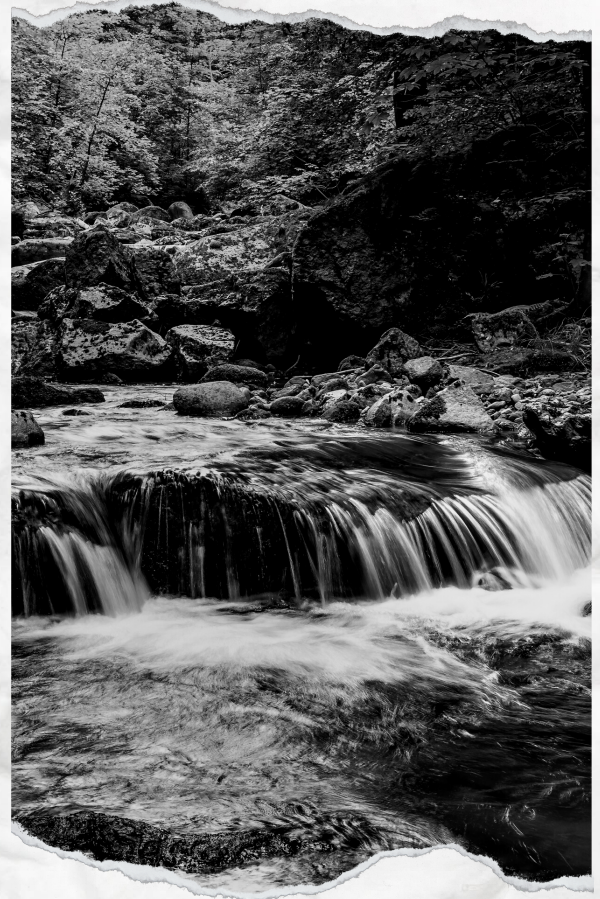


WRITTEN BY
JP RELPH

“This is where Joe died,” I tell Keeley, watching her eyes widen.

She recently moved to town, into the new build on the western edge. Tall beige-brick houses with diamonds of lawn. Her family must have money. I found her eating lunch alone at school—fancy brown sandwiches with salad, a tub of purple grapes. I sat down with my lank ham, said, “Hi.”

I waited two weeks to show her the river. The place where my brother drowned last summer. Not the same water, of course; it’s always moving, changing, like life after loss for some. I took her to where he jumped from. The skinny track made by kids over many summers. Beating back the thorny bushes with sticks until they gave up trying to swallow it again. Weeds stomped to green smears. Single-file only, elbows tucked in to evade grabbing branches, then a sharp drop to the river. To the deepest part. The darkest part.



**HER TOFFEE-BROWN
EYES MOVE FROM MY
FACE TO THE RIVER
AND BACK AGAIN,
LIKE SHE’S WAITING
FOR ME TO CRY.**

You stand on the edge of that battered track, insects smashing your face, sun making you red and stinking, feel the chill pull of the water. Most don't jump; they chicken out, fight past whoever's behind them, preferring thorns tearing and nettle-bites to the gurgling unknown. Joe was never chicken.

My trainers poke just over the edge and I feel the shift of sun-baked soil. Keeley's behind me, sunburned, scratching at red bumps on her neck. Her toffee-brown eyes move from my face to the river and back again, like she's waiting for me to cry.

"He jumped in after a rainstorm; the water was high, really cold."

Keeley edges backwards; a nettle catches the soft skin behind her knee and she jerks.

"He drowned real fast. They say he wouldn't have suffered." I turn to Keeley and I know my eyes are like the river's darkest part. "Not sure how they know that though, the river kept him." I wrestle my mouth into a smile and point to the derelict factory upriver, where the druggies go. "It's nicer there, the water's shallower. You can paddle and catch water-bugs. We could go tomorrow."

"Maybe we should go, Jessie," Keeley says, her cheeks like tomatoes ready to burst. Panic like a bug trapped in her throat.

"Yes, we really should." I rock for a couple of moments and imagine Joe's scabby black trainers instead of mine. Rocking, pushing down, pushing off. The river like winter all around him, rolling him over rocks, surging inside him.

I reach for Keeley's hand; she hesitates, clawing the pretty material of her shorts. I step away from the track-end. "You lead the way, Kee. I don't wanna get thorns on me."

"I'm sorry about Joe," she says as we leave the river behind.

"That's sweet of you." I glance over my shoulder, no sign of the water now.



Mum has the TV on in the kitchen when I get home. She's chopping carrots, adding them to the dented stew pan. "Where you been?" Her face is gray, her hands red. She looks older than other mums; saggy and wrinkled like an old pillow, hair dirty-orange like the carrot peelings.

"Just out with Keeley."

"I asked *where*, Jessie." She doesn't look up, watches the knife. The five o'clock news blares on the TV. A policeman on the screen. His face is gray, too.

"Not there," I reply, reaching into the fridge for milk. I swear Mum smells the lie

on me. The crushed weeds, thorn bushes, the river on my skin, in my hair.

She swipes sweat from her forehead, the knife still gripped, reaches for a turnip. “Tea’ll be ready in an hour. Go do your school stuff.”

The policeman is asking locals to *be vigilant, come forward with any information pertinent to the missing kids*. I drink my milk. “I don’t have school stuff, it’s holidays.”

Mum looks up then, her eyes are like washing left on the line of an abandoned house. Dad couldn’t look at them anymore, so he left. We think he’s in Spain. “Well, go and do something instead of drinking all the milk.”

Some awful quiz show comes on. Mum slashes at the turnip. I hate stew. She always makes enough for four, hardly eats herself. I think she just likes to use the knife. I go to my room, wonder what Keeley is having for tea. Something fancy, with sauces and stuff, maybe fish. That makes me grimace; I shudder despite the pent-up heat.



Night creeps up on the river in the place where it’s shallowest, swallows it with black lips. In the broken windows of the derelict factory, pops of hazy white appear; addicts lighting their way to oblivion. The river’s unnaturally still, has the brackish smell of standing water. Insects are quiet, cloaked by the weeds.

The creature pushes through the sluggish water, stirring the silt, scattering the braver water-bugs. Fearful moonlight turns its gray skin to liquid metal as it slither-walks up the riverbank, taloned feet sinking into the soft earth. It turns blue-black eyes to the lights flickering and blinking. A forked tongue, wide as its obscenely grinning mouth, samples the night air. Sour sweat and sun-withered grass, bitter chemical smoke and animal scat. A wet growl pulses through its fleshy throat, a tinny whine blasts through horse-sized nostrils. The creature moves through the grass; somehow crocodilian and serpentine. Stalking slow then galloping. Muscular tail whipping the heads off wildflowers.



Mum is on the couch watching TV when I get up for breakfast, the living room already foggy with cigarette smoke; Mum is grayer than ever behind slabs of it. The pills she takes to sleep are still in her eyes; red-veiny and wet. I put the kettle on and eat cereal standing by the open window. It rained hard last night; I breathe in the

steamy grass smells.

I take Mum her tea, stepping inside her wall of smoke. She doesn't take her eyes off the news. A reporter stands outside the derelict factory by the river. *The police received reports of screaming coming from inside during the night.*

"They should burn it down." Mum's voice is cigarette-ruined. Everything inside her wall is ruined.

I nod as the cameraman zooms in on one of the factory's shattered windows. Ivy and nightshade choking the bricks, reaching inside. Shredded flowers like old tissues. *Attending officers found no signs of foul play.*

I swallow a mouthful of spit, soured with milk. "I'm going out with Keeley," I tell Mum, pretending not to notice the tear shivering on her eyelashes.

"Not there."

"Course, Mum, never there."

I shower to get rid of the smoky stink from my hair and skin, and the fear sweat that had bobbed in the small of my back. I bet Keeley's mum doesn't smoke. Their house will smell of fresh flowers and baking, and those big fancy candles in glass jars.



We spend the whole day together; walking and picking wildflowers, eating chips in the churchyard, chatting on the swings. Keeley has to go home for tea; I lie that I'm doing the same, and get crisps and chocolate from the shop. I can't see Mum yet. Her washed-out eyes behind smoke. Reheated stew and cheap bread. I spend all my pocket money. After tea, Keeley and I go the long way to the river, ice-pops getting melty in our hands.

There's no police or reporters left. The factory's empty, for now. Keeley says her dad thinks it was a hoax call. I murmur agreement through blueberry flavored ice. Keeley's lips are stained lime green. I open a bottle of lemonade—gone warm in my shorts pocket—and give it to her first.

We lie on the grass near the shallows, goosebumped from the cold treats, insects crawling on the sticky wrappers. The sun is low, a blood-orange smear, and the river shushes around rocks. I watch Keeley close her eyes. The lemonade bottle has toppled near her hand, spilled sweetness into the grass. Hornet things dart at it before whizzing away.

"It's nice here," Keeley whispers.

I don't know if she means the river or the town. They've become one for me. A

place I might never leave.

“Come to mine for tea tomorrow.” Keeley smiles, sleepy in the dying sun.

I try to imagine what that would be like. Picture a big dining table with pretty tablecloth, plates with roses on. Something bubbling and fragrant in a big pot. Curry maybe. I’ve never had curry; Mum won’t cook ‘foreign food.’ Joe always said he’d get a summer job and take us to a curry house with his wages. We’d get the spiciest things on the menu, drink all the cokes we wanted. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

I stand up, the back of my legs crinkled and grass-greened, and stare at the sooty-gray water until I see the first bubbles. A huge, dark shape moves beneath the surface. Keeley moans only a little as I drag her to the water. I’m getting the dosage right now—Mum’s pill crushed into pop, tasteless. Before that, I had to fight to get them near the water. I got scratched and bruised, had to tell Mum I’d fallen off the swings. She threw the medicine box at me.

He bursts from the water in a single leap, thudding onto the sandy soil. Water runs down his slick, gray skin, mist puffs from his big nostrils. I drop Keeley’s wrists and step towards him. He’s changed even more. Nothing at all of the boy left. Not even the eyes—which were still mostly his last time: denim blue, tormented. They’re cat-shaped now, glossy blue-black like the flies that storm the house in summer. It’s easier to look into them. His mouth stretches horribly wide, like a cartoon shark, full of black teeth. From within comes a sound like a distant howling wind that makes me shiver from head to toe. It sounds like pain and loss and anger all at once. I heard it before, at the church when four men carried an empty coffin inside, nasty blue-dyed flowers spelling Joe’s name.

I heard it from me.

He takes Keeley’s shoulder almost gently in his mouth, retreats with her into the river, sparing me the blood, the crunching. His four clawed feet leave deep marks in the soil—the rain will have dealt with last night’s; these I scuff away with my trainers. Keeley floats for a moment, all yellow and pink and blonde on the gray, gray water.

“Bye,” I say, and it’s not to her, and I wish, as always, that it was the last time.

I don’t visit the grave. It’s just a box in a hole. It’s just a lie. Mum plants flowers there; they always go brown and die. The river is Joe’s grave. His non-resting place. In a way, it’s mine, too.

The river gulps as Keeley’s pulled under. He calls to me, my once-brother, a hitching whine-howl that puts another crack in my heart, then his shark-like tail

scythes the chill night air and he's gone. They're gone. I feel so incredibly tired as I pick up the empty bottle, the ice-pop wrappers, and go the short way home.



Autumn changes the skinny track; still hedged in by thorny bushes, but the leaves are dark red and orange. Different weeds and bugs, everything wet, glistening. My trainers poke over the track-edge, the soil held together by roots. There's a hard chill from the river and I wish I'd worn a jumper. A new rush to it, too, from all the rain, like it's angry. Like it's vengeful. I lean further out, feel my stomach tumble, lurch back. I was always chicken.

"Careful, Jessie!" Andy shouts and I take his outstretched hand.

He's behind me on the track, a beanie holding his dark curls in, a fancy jumper keeping him warm. His family are staying at the holiday lodges outside town. I met him at the park there, and waited a week to show him the river.

I pull Andy a little closer to the edge, watch his summer-blue eyes.

"This is where Joe died."



JP Relph



JP Relph is a working-class writer from northwest England, mostly hindered by four cats and aided by copious tea.

She volunteers in a charity shop where they let her dress mannequins and source haunted objects. A forensic science degree and passion for microbes, insects, and botany often influence her words. JP writes about apocalypses quite a lot (but hasn't the knees for one) and her post-apoc flash collection was published by Alien Buddha Press in June 2023.

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A CROW'S

POETRY INTERLUDE



BLOOD MOON

Wrap the night around me;
cloak me in shadows, extinguish the stars.
I am a creature of darkness now;
I have no need for their distant fires.
Cast off your old skin and run with me now;
let's howl the blood moon down.
Together we'll be the most savage beasts
this world has ever known.
When I arose I found that Heaven
had barred its gates to me,
but that troubles me not: Raising hell on earth
will be just as heavenly.
The sky is dark, the time is ripe
for my will to be done.
I'll spread my arms out to the night
and howl the blood moon down.

SARAH CANNAVO

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Of the Many Faces



WRITTEN BY
AMANDA M. BLAKE

Dampen the light and gutter the lamp. As soon as the candle leads them to her door, she snuffs it out.

When he met her, she conjured him with endless carnal knowledge in the movement of her hips and guileless innocence in face, pristine—the only stitches kept to shadows where no one looks too closely, and in the night, in the dark, no one has to see. It has been weeks, these surreptitious meetings, and money has scarcely passed hands in the last few.

In the midst of his infatuation, she too is entranced—by his youth, enthusiasm, his more honest innocence and the earnestness that accompanies all three. She tells herself, *One more time, one more time in the dark, he doesn't have to see.*

She can see by moon and starlight through the windows, while she is worm form to him, lithe and pale out of the dress and chemise, for she is lithe underneath all, but not pale. The worms within her are dormant, unable to breathe beneath



**NO MATTER THE
POWER SHE HOLDS,
NO MATTER THE
QUALITY OF HER
STITCH, SHE CANNOT
EXTEND THE DEAD.**

more and more dire patchwork of skins, and the worm of him is awake and alive in her mouth. He arches, beautiful man, helpless beneath her long, long tongue.

Fists in his golden curls, fists in the sheets. She tries not to make claws in his thighs as she swallows him in a deep, slick embrace, and she withholds a cry when he releases the sheets to make fists in her hair instead, because he snaps stitches, pulls at the scalp, pulls at the knots, pulls at the skin, pulls at her flesh, for it is all sewn together. She inhabits the skins, becomes them, but they do not become her, and they do not last.

No matter the power she holds, no matter the quality of her stitch, she cannot extend the dead.

But she doesn't want to shed this one, doesn't want to shed the way he nuzzles her neck when she wears the perfume he bought, doesn't want to shed his fingers on her bodice and the skin above to the choking gift of ivory cameo that he said reminded him of her, doesn't want to shed his wishes and dreams and the girl's youth and naivete that so draws him to her. She herself is neither young nor naïve, except in her little delusion that as long as she can keep him in the dark, he won't notice that the stitches multiply and the skin folds and stretches too much from her angles, like melting wax.

If she can cocoon him in his infatuation, drown him in pleasure, so he can call her pretty once more...

His fist tears through too many stitches; a whole patch rips off. The girl's blood seeps from the edges, and hers seeps from her scalp in a slow river of crude oil. Her nose twitches against the scent of decay from the skin and of the ancient in her, both stronger from being sewn in for so long.

He wrinkles his nose with a sound of revulsion, distracted from his pleasure. He flips the piece of wig scalp from his hand and tries to find another handhold.

The scalp collapses from her skull, and her face slowly peels away.

She grabs his hands and slams them to the bed, constricts over his erection until he's moaning, until he's coming and can't help it. But then she no longer has his pleasure to hold, and before she can find her needle and thread, he strikes a match for his cigarette.



Even a demon can weep.

If a demon's heart beats, it waits too long between, but blood flows just the same,

because when she weeps, she bleeds—from her eyes, from immortal wounds, from between the seams of skin she's stitched to herself, as though they remember a quickening heart.

She remembers, too, remembers the quick and the dead, for the skin holds both who and who was. So when she's seen in another's face, sometimes she can be someone else for a while, at least until she goes to pieces. The girls are young, smaller than she. She stretches their skin too far on her woman frame, beyond the belief of those who know them, even if she patches others in.

He went soft and squirmy beneath her. She tried to convince him that her tongue was still wicked and she was still the same in the dark, but he screamed that she was a revolting, vile thing, and he stabbed and she skittered with the whimpers of a little girl in her throat.

She doesn't know why she falls for such pretty faces when she knows how easy she is to rent. When she strips it all away—the skins, the wig, the shift—and lets herself be demon, she finds nothing to regret or revile, but she is a creature of windows and reflections, and with so many mirrors, perhaps it is not such a surprise that sometimes she wants to be the pretty thing, admired, desired.

It is her weakness, to become so enamored of the face she wears that she becomes even more so of another's.

She carves away each lingering stitch, sheds the ill-preserved dead skin from where it still attaches to her face, but removing the skin doesn't take away her memories, nor the pain. And so she weeps and bleeds onto the obsidian glass floor, repulsed by the mirrors, the many pretty faces staring in her windows, as though mocking her.

Oh, their beauty changes and fades, and it does not save them. If it did, she would not be able to take it for herself. But she is forever, and their heartbeating bodies are so brief.

She lays in the disintegrating dead and the black-red puddle of her grief. Why does she do this to herself again and again? Why does she hope one day that her skins will peel away and what they see on the other side is a strange beautiful butterfly from the inadequate flesh of young girls that cannot contain her, nor hold a candle? She has been a fool longer than it took for humans to learn the meaning of the word, yet still she is willing to make a fool of herself as she seeks an answer, a form, a face.

It is such a long journey. The girls think they know the meaning of pain. When she's finished with the harvest, they begin to understand but break before the revelation, and she cannot. Perhaps that is the blessing of brevity. She must endure

her fall over and over, because she yearns, oh yes, she yearns, with the desires of a million girls—little flames—and the eternal bonfire of her own.

She rocks in the dark among the unmoving hanging bodies until the blood finally slows, drips, and she crawls from the pieces as her whole. There is only one thing to do when her vestigial heart is broken by something so common as a young man, worm-crushed beneath her taloned feet.

The journey is long, but her searchlight has not changed. Her bonfire cannot be quenched. All she knows is the needle and thread, and the million mirrors.



*Bloody Mary,
Bloody Mary,
Bloody Mary.*

What name they use or how many times, what ritual, what rhyme, matters little. The demon knows when she is called, and when she is hungry.

Another pretty girl—young but not as young as some—weeps salt over heartbreak of her own, and to some level, the demon understands, even sympathizes. But the woes of a teenage girl seem so small to her, not worm but writhing grub—yet any feeling would seem vast for something so minute.

The candles flickering on the other side make her tears glow and call attention to her gleaming curls. For a moment, they remind the demon of *him*, and she bares her teeth in the shadows of the girl's reflection. As she oozes pain, worms wriggle awake and alive from their caverns, roused by newer, fresher air.

I cannot take this pain.

The demon wears what might once have been a wedding dress, but it has drunk too many centuries of her blood to be anything but black as her skin, her eyes, her gums. Beads gleam like gravestone dew. The girl is too distracted to notice details, but it is the details that brand the sight of her into those who live. Not every girl who calls can see, and not all girls who see can serve the demon's needs. To be called, people need to be told how to call her, and to tell the story, they must live.

But the demon weeps still, black blood down the wormholes and slime tracks of her bare face, hungrier for the loss. She sees her own reflection in the girl's, and in that image, she sees what he'd covered from. Though it is beautiful, she sees only the ugliness in the bloody visage. Despite the girl's own bloody damage, she has what the demon does not have. Such a pretty dress. Such pretty hair. Such pretty skin. Such

pretty face.

*Bloody Mary, come to me,
So I may abide again,
Bloody Mary,
Bloody Mary,
Bloody Mary.*

The demon emerges, shadow from shadow, contours of light. And she sees it again when the girl sees her.

Disgust.

They beg for her favor, and they pay, yes, they pay. They want her to come to them and they want her to make them come, but they don't want to look upon her, and those who love her can never see her face.

She could leave it at the girl's scream and let that be a lesson. But the memory of him is too raw. She needs a thicker skin. She needs to forget.

"Hello, child."

Beckoned by blood and tears, the demon pulls the girl through the silver into her black-glass world of windows and mirrors and girls without faces praying that madness takes them before death.

The demon has her needle and thread, the scalpel of her claws, and the girl's beautiful screams as she becomes acquainted with a vaster, deeper, more delicious pain for the demon to feed upon.



The demon tightens the seams and smiles to test her dexterity. She has a million mirrors in which to view her supple new skin. Some adjustments are needed through the rest of the body, but the dress covers where she needs to find new girls for graft.

This will do for now. Through her fresher blood, the girl's thoughts, desires, wishes, memories flood into the demon to replace the girl's screams in her head.

Already, she has begun to forget. Once she patches the missing pieces, her heart won't even show a scar.



Amanda M. Blake



A mass of tentacles and rose vines masquerading as a person, Amanda M. Blake is the author of such horror titles as *Deep Down* and *Out of Curiosity and Hunger*, dark poetry collection *Dead Ends*, and the Thorns fairy tale mash-up series.

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THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



The Girl and the Wolf



WRITTEN BY
RACHAEL A EDWARDS

The wolf is running through the woods. Mud, soft and wet, churns beneath its feet, leaving a trail of too-visible prints in its wake. It does not have time to worry about the trail it leaves. Not when it can feel its bones shifting beneath its flesh, each *crack* a mirror of the thunder strikes splitting the sky. *Just a little further*, the wolf thinks, urging its legs to move faster. If it can reach the tree line, it can disappear into the forest before it's too late.

The wolf is ten steps away when the echo of a gun goes off.

The bullet misses by barely an inch, piercing the ground beneath the wolf's back paw. The humans hunting it do not see as well in the dark, but the sky is slowly lightening, and the wolf hears the low chitter of birds rising for the day.

With a final surge of adrenaline, the wolf closes the distance between itself and the safety of the forest, slinking into the shadows as the second bullet is fired. This



HER BLOOD RUNS
COLD AT THE
REALIZATION, BUT IT
IS NOT FEAR SHE FEELS
AS THE WOLF INSIDE
OPENS A SLUMBERING
EYE.

one skims the tree it is passing, tainting the air with the throat-clogging scent of metal and ash, a visceral reminder of how close the wolf has come to getting caught.

It is this reminder that keeps it running even as the fur begins to fall from its flesh. The pain radiating through its bones is almost too much to ignore, and thick, warm blood coats its mouth as its fangs begin to withdraw. But it is only when the distant sound of hoofbeats finally falls silent that it allows itself to stop.

Not a moment too soon.

As the sun begins to rise above the distant mountains, the change rips through the wolf's body in a flood of fire that burns her memories to ash.



The girl wakes to blinding sunlight.

Her arm instinctively shields her eyes, but it's too late; pain from behind her eyes has already spread in a vice around her head, and the dull ache of it sends her stomach roiling.

“Elisabeth!” Her mother's voice is a too-loud shrill that makes her wince.

Lord, she just wants to go back to sleep. Every inch of her body aches as if she's been swimming in the village lake, and there's an odd, coppery taste in the back of her throat that makes her want to be sick.

The wooden door of her small bedroom slams open, and before Elisabeth can even groan in protest, her mother pulls the covers off her with a loud *tsk*. “There is no time to lay about, child. We are expected at the village hall by midday.”

Elisabeth lowers her arm and squints at her mother. “It is Saturday. Meetings are never held on a Saturday.”

“Not usually. Today is an exception.” Her mother turns to the wooden wardrobe in the corner and retrieves a plain, cotton dress she knows her daughter hates. Elisabeth has barely swung her feet over the side of her cot when the garment is thrust into her lap. “You will be ready to leave in half a bell. Dress quickly, child—and for Heavens' sake, make sure you wash those feet!”

Her mother is out of the room before her words fully register.

Her brow furrows as her gaze drifts to the bare feet she is *certain* she washed before bed.

Her breath catches at the state of them. Thick flakes of dried mud cling to her pale flesh in clumps, and the edges of her usually smooth nails are cracked and black. The last time she'd seen them in such a mess, she'd been a little girl running barefoot

through Master Fletcher's fields on a dare.

But Elisabeth had not even been outside last night. She had bathed in the copper tub before the fireplace, slipped on her nightgown, and retired to bed before midnight.

Hadn't she?

Perhaps you were sleepwalking, she thinks. It is the only explanation she can fathom. The only explanation that makes sense.

And yet as she scrubs the dirt from her feet, Elisabeth cannot make herself believe it.



The village hall is more packed than Elisabeth has ever seen it.

It seems like everyone in their small community is in attendance, from the kindly Master Fletcher to the elderly couple who live on the village outskirts. It's rare for them to attend any meetings unless mandatory, and their presence only feeds the knot of apprehension in Elisabeth's stomach.

She wants to whisper into her mother's ear and ask her what this is all about, but the village hall is eerily silent. And so Elisabeth curls her fingers into her knees and does the only thing she can.

She waits.

Patience has never been her strongest attribute, and by the time Mayoress Edith enters the hall and ascends the wooden platform at the far end of the room, Elisabeth feels like she's about to crawl out of her skin.

"Thank you for attending this meeting on such short notice," the Mayoress begins. "As you are all aware, there have been an increasing number of attacks on our wildlife over recent weeks; Master Fletcher has lost half of his coop, and last week, the carcass of a wild deer was found on the outskirts of the village." She pauses, and the grief in her eyes when she looks over the crowd pierces something deep in Elisabeth's chest. "Whilst these are awful losses, I am afraid it has gotten worse. In the early hours of this morning, Master Fletcher's apprentice discovered the body of young Leonard Holland."

The name causes the steady hum beneath Elisabeth's skin to rise to a crescendo. A memory flashes, hazy and just out of reach, and whilst the rest of the crowd's attention stays firmly fixed on the Mayoress, Elisabeth finds herself searching the crowd for another face.

Gabriel Alder stands toward the back of the room, his arms folded over his chest as he watches the meeting from the shadows. She knows little of the young man except for his job as Master Fletcher's ward and the fact that Leonard Holland is—was—his only friend.

It is for this reason she expects to see grief in his expression, but when she meets his gaze, there is nothing there but rage.

She looks away without knowing why, cheeks burning as the pace of her heart picks up. Run, her mind warns. Run now.

“You told us a fox was behind these attacks!” Annabel Bowery calls out. “How could a fox take down a lad like Leonard?”

Mayoress Edith clears her throat. “It seems we were mistaken. Gabriel...please, tell the village what you told Constable Elwood this morning.”

Gabriel steps forward from the shadows, his fists clenched at his sides, and the scent of gunpowder and rain clinging to him is strangely familiar. “Leonard was not alone when I found him. There was a wolf standing over his body; it ran when I appeared. I did not think when it fled; I simply grabbed my horse and shotgun and gave chase. Alas, I lost it in the forest. But not before I discovered something... unusual.”

He stops to meet the Mayoress's eyes, only continuing when the older woman dips her chin in a sign of encouragement.

“The wolf's tracks...they turned human. I believe we have a werebeast on our hands—and I have reason to believe it lives among us.”



A curfew is enforced on the village.

It takes less than three days for Elisabeth to feel as if she is losing her mind. Nights have always been her time for solitude. A time to walk the streets with no one to accompany her but the moon and stars.

“Stop being so dramatic, Elisabeth,” her mother sighs. She's entered her room without knocking again, and Elisabeth is staring longingly out of her small window. “It is unbecoming of a young lady to be out after dark, anyway. Perhaps this curfew will finally keep you in line.”

I do not need to be kept in line, Elisabeth thinks, digging her nails into the flesh of her knees. *I need to be free*. She does not say this. Instead, she asks, “What do you want, mother?”

For a moment, her mother almost looks ashamed. “Master Fletcher’s ward is here. He wishes to speak with you.”

Elisabeth’s stomach drops. “Me? What about?”

“Heaven knows, girl. Now, do not keep him waiting!”

Her mother leaves, and Elisabeth has no choice but to follow. She has seen nothing of Gabriel since the village meeting, but the memory of his rage-filled gaze and the scent of gunpowder on his skin has clouded her dreams.

I have reason to believe it lives among us.

The beast could be anyone. The baker’s son, or the Mayoress herself. But Gabriel has given her no real reason to suspect it might be him.

And yet as she sees him standing on her front porch, that warning voice in her head once more whispers, *Run.*

He bows his head. “Lady Elisabeth. May I have a moment of your time?”

Run.

“I...suppose so.” It takes every bit of her willpower to step onto the porch. Her mother has drifted into the kitchen, but Elisabeth has no doubt she is listening, on her guard should Elisabeth say something *unbecoming.*

Frustration churns in her stomach, but she forces a smile when Gabriel gestures to the porch swing. “Please, take a seat.”

Elisabeth does, if only to stop the shaking of her legs. And when Gabriel sits beside her, the scent of him—gunpowder and blood—makes her skin crawl.

“I’m sorry to drop by unannounced. But I had to return something to you.”

Elisabeth’s brow furrows. It’s difficult to comprehend his words with the pounding in her head, but she manages to ask, “What...?”

He reaches into his pocket. One moment his hand is empty, and the next, it holds a dark red scarf smattered with blood.

Her scarf.

The sight of it triggers a memory. The open fields of Master Fletcher’s estate. Leonard, a smug smile on his face, unwilling to leave her alone. Gabriel, watching from afar, doing nothing to help her as Leonard grabbed her waist.

Her body, burning up as if it were on fire.

Her scarf, floating to the ground as she sank her fangs into Leonard’s throat.

It was me.

Her blood runs cold at the realization, but it is not fear she feels as the wolf inside her opens a slumbering eye.

It is power.

All this time, she has tried so hard to be the dutiful daughter. To be the lady society expects her to be. For a girl is expected to kneel to the whims of her betters.

But a wolf? A wolf need not cower to any master.

Gabriel lunges for her as the change rips through her body, lengthening her teeth into dangerous fangs and her nails into deadly claws. The same ones that had saved her from Leonard's advances just a few nights before.

But now, when the wolf sinks tooth and claw into the flesh of the man who would do her harm, the girl does not look away. She memorizes every sound, every smell.

And when she awakens in her human form hours later, naked and bloodied beneath the fading light of the moon, she finally allows herself to do the one thing she has been afraid of all this time.

She remembers.



Rachael A Edwards



Rachael A Edwards first discovered her love of storytelling at a young age, when she got lost in tales of witches, fairies, and magical realms. Hailing from England, she spends most of her days writing fantasy novels about morally gray characters in worlds filled with mythology, corruption, and magic.

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OLD SKINS NEWLY SHED

Break here or ride
Amongst the severed dread,
Summer's end is near—
Beware the sudden tide
Or fear those who could be dead,
Grinning sorrows of yesterday's bite.
Our time is due to rise!
Here upon each midnight,
Sworn to fumble and crease,
Of every tooth and claw,
Every bone and sinew—
All crack and bend upon release.
Our time is growing near,
This tide we no longer fear,
Beheld by magic and fate.
Do not mourn for our loss,
For it is our transformation
In which we make;
An old skin newly shed,
A new form for old souls to take.

LYNNECCA B. ARDEN



THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Proof



WRITTEN BY
GRACE F. HOPKINS



**THE EYES.
THAT WAS THE THING
THAT KEPT BOTHERING
HER. THE EYES. SHE
COULD ALMOST FEEL
THEM NOW...**

The mist hung heavy in the forest, turning the birch trees into rigid phantoms. As Cassy picked her way through the underbrush, she realized this moment was eternal. Liminal. One of those untethered instances.

It was ten in the morning, but the mist suspended everything in a timeless between. Despite the chilling breeze stirring upper branches, she was sweating even as she pulled her sweatshirt sleeves over her hands. The ground, still wet from last night's rain, threatened to stain her jeans with mud. Carol would have a fit if she showed up to her shift sweaty and looking like she'd been crawling through the woods.

But there wasn't time to do this later. And it had to be done.

A dogged curiosity—or was it paranoia?—had tossed her about last night until she'd woken at dawn, slick with sweat and gasping, images from last night painting themselves in lurid streaks across the backdrop of her sleep.

The eyes.

That was the thing that kept bothering her. The eyes.

She could almost feel them now, boring into the back of her neck.

A quick glance over her shoulder revealed only the solemn and sparse trees, the lingering mist. Nothing else.

“You’re fine,” she whispered to herself as she bit back the familiar dread. “There’s no one there.”

She scanned the underbrush for tracks, tufts of fur, *anything*. She’d gone deer hunting enough as a kid to know the basics of tracking; all she needed was a trail. It couldn’t have gotten far last night, not when it was injured. Not when it had limped off into the woods on only three of its legs, legs far too thick for a deer.

Her mother’s borrowed car, waiting just over the crest of the hill, was lost in the mist now. The only evidence of the winding road she’d parked it on was the occasional hiss of tires against damp pavement, growing more muffled with every step. If not for those, she could almost believe she was floating out here in a time between times, a space between spaces.

Floating.

That’s what it felt like to live in her head these days. Floating. A feeling of being not-quite-there. A feeling that everything around her, the people she spoke to, the emotions she felt, the tableau of daily life wasn’t quite *real*. She was always outside of herself, with reality more a concept than a thing to be lived in.

But last night had been real. Of that she was certain. Even if no one believed her.

A patch of mud squelched under her tennis shoe, the dangling laces slopping through the muck. She sighed, paused, bent and re-tied them, wrinkling her nose at the sensation of mud against skin.

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled again, but she shook off the unease, rolling her shoulders as she straightened up. She turned around. But still. Nothing.

“Quit being so paranoid,” she muttered. Her father would chastise her for this, the muttering. He didn’t like that she talked to herself. But most of the time, she didn’t notice that she was. And when she did, it was because she needed something to ground her, to keep the panic at bay.

In truth, the moments after it happened last night—the world full of squealing tires, her wildly bouncing headlights, the smell of burning rubber, the visceral fear seizing her as she stared through the windshield—were a few of the rare moments that brought her back into herself. A few of the rare moments that actually made her

feel *alive*. A few blessed moments where, despite all odds, the panic that haunted her every waking moment was finally gratified, and a strange and disproportionate calm set in.

For while nothing around her felt quite real these days, last night had felt more than real.

And she had to prove it.

This was certainly the right stretch of wood. It'd been easy enough to find the skid marks, the bent telephone pole, the remaining glass from her now-totaled beater. But so far, the woods had revealed nothing. No proof. And she needed proof. So on she went.

She'd stayed late to close last night, a not-so-unusual occurrence. The coffee shop was quiet and she enjoyed the time alone, washing the last dishes, counting the change in the cash register. Time to think.

She'd still been lost in thought as she'd driven the serpentine curves of Country Road 11, the drizzle shimmering in the light of her high beams. It was deer season, as Dad incessantly reminded her, but after living in these wooded valleys and winding mountain roads, she'd managed three years with her driver's license without even coming close to hitting a deer.

Until last night.

She'd been scanning the trees on either side, looking instinctively for blurs of movement or shining eyes. It wasn't due to negligence that she hadn't seen it.

No. It'd just *appeared*, there in the center of her headlights. There one moment, when it hadn't been before. All she could do was brace herself and slam on the brakes, praying the laws of motion would somehow suspend themselves just long enough for her to avoid impact, the splintering of bone, her flesh leaking blood.

No such luck.

She had fish-tailed on the wet pavement. Her front bumper slammed into a telephone pole. Glass shattered. And then she was scrambling from the car around the mess of pluming airbag, the rubble of fractured glass. Her hands and knees met the wet ground outside, her stomach heaving, her limbs shaking. She looked back to the road.

And *it* looked back at her.

It hadn't moved.

It stood in the slant of her flickering headlights. Thick legs, broad shoulders, an upturned tail all culminated in a vaguely cervine body. A stocky neck and a rack of

antlers hinted at a buck, but along with its abnormal proportions, there was something *wrong* about it.

The eyes.

The eyes were not on the sides of its head as a deer's should be, as *any* prey animal's should be. No.

Its eyes were forward-facing.

And still it stared at her, as if *she* had been in *its* way, as if this was *its* road and to hell with her for being so presumptuous. An ancient kind of fury emanated from it. She had no doubt, in that moment, that it would kill her if she stayed.

Her nerves howled and her legs prepared for flight.

For a wild moment, she considered plunging into the forest, running blindly, anywhere—*away*—and praying it wouldn't follow. Because it could out run her, she knew that instinctively.

But then the other set of headlights appeared.

Only then did the thing turn away, just in time to stare at the truck barreling down the opposite lane.

The squeal of brakes, the sound of impact, the spray of blood against pavement as the truck eclipsed its leap to safety.

The truck skidded to a halt and the *thing* had scampered off into the forest, leaving a trail of crimson in its wake.

She hadn't smelt the blood last night, but she smelled it now. The faint tinge of iron in the wet air.

Her eyes strayed to the left of her newly-tied tennis shoe, to the spat of blood on the forest floor. Then, a few yards away, another.

She was after it like a scent hound, the blood stains making an erratic path. A speck here, a streak there.

"Please, don't let this be a dead end."

A bit of blood wouldn't do her much good. She needed a body.

No matter that her mind had been buzzing with an endless litany of worries these past months. No matter that the dread still hung over her like a guillotine blade about to drop. She knew what she'd seen last night had been real.

And once she found proof, so would they.

The first panic attack had come three weeks into fall semester, a mere month after leaving home. Then had come the throat-closing anxiety, the certainty she would die in her sleep, the little rituals and rhythms she *had* to adhere to lest the hunting dog

of dread catch her unprepared.

It had nearly broken her, this fear. It had sent her back home at Christmas break. And there she stayed.

Her parents swore she wasn't a disappointment, swore she just needed time. Going away to college was a big adjustment, after all. But she knew they worried. She saw it in their too-tight smiles, their corner-of-the-eye looks, their false positivity, their anxiety hovering at the edge of everything. But still, they didn't name their fear, didn't speak it aloud. Because to do that would be to admit there was something *wrong*, and that wouldn't do. Not in their household.

It'd been a relief, in a way, to see their worry last night. To have her mother fling her arms around her and sob unapologetically, to see her father's face blanched white in the moonlight.

Finally. They were letting themselves feel. They *were* human after all.

Though they couldn't express their worry about Cassy's mind, they could at least express another fear. The car, the scrapes and bruises across her face—*those* they could fix.

But when she'd told them what she'd seen, why she'd crashed, the familiar guardedness, the poorly-disguised wariness had returned.

The spats of blood multiplied on the forest floor now. Soon the ground sloped away towards the creek, and in the mud along the bank—tracks.

Huge cloven hooves, too wide for the average deer, irregular in their gait, as if the creature had been limping.

Her heart beat in her throat. A familiar sense of dread began to claw its way up from her stomach. She batted it down. Not now. Not when she was so close.

"I didn't think elk came this far south, but I suppose it's not impossible."

"It wasn't an elk, Dad. And it wasn't a deer either."

A placating smile. *"Then what was it, sweetheart?"*

"I...I don't know."

"You know," her mother had said from across the kitchen table. *"The other driver said it was the biggest deer he'd ever seen. In the darkness it must've looked—"*

They didn't believe her.

Of course they didn't.

This was just another strike against her, more proof she wasn't *normal*, wasn't *coping well*.

But she told them, just as she'd told the other driver, whatever that was, it was

not a deer.

Down toward the creek she went, the tracks sinking deeper, more regular. She followed after them, equal parts anticipation and fear. A quick photo was all she was after. Maybe a tuft of fur. But what if it was still alive?

No matter. She'd figure it out later.

The dread was all-consuming now. Her skin crawled, her mouth ran dry. She tried to shake it off. She was just nervous, as usual.

She followed the tracks, keeping pace with the creek. Any second and she would see a body. Any second and she'd have her proof. And then they would all *know* she wasn't lying, wasn't crazy.

The trail was clear now, the tracks unobscured by leaves. Steady, plain.

Until—

They stopped.

And a new set of tracks began where the cloven hooves ended.

Human tracks.

Large, barefoot, certain, blood pooling in the heels.

She blinked. Crouched to the ground. It was almost as if—

"I *knew* it wasn't a deer," she breathed. But fear eroded her victory. Her hands shook.

The prickling sensation intensified. The dread roared through her veins. She felt eyes glaring into the back of her neck. The scent of blood returned. Fresh. Potent. Behind her, the underbrush creaked. Footsteps.

A low laugh sent gooseflesh over her arms.

"No," a voice agreed—dangerous, smooth, and terribly amused, "it wasn't."



Grace F. Hopkins



Grace F. Hopkins is a fiction writer hailing from the Midwest. When she's not spinning words into stories, she's collecting dead languages and urban legends with fervor. She flavors her fiction with both the eldritch and the Transcendental because she believes that the best fiction is the most truthful and the best Truths are both arresting and strange. She blogs about folklore, fantasy, and other areas of writing with her fellow writers & co-conspirators.

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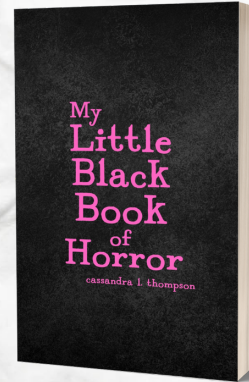
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This one shows what we say to those who hate on fall.

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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 *Historical Horror* 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.J. Wieland



TRIGGER INDEX

- **Body horror/transformation**
mentioned..... *The Girl and the Wolf*
Of the Many Faces
Old Skin Newly Shed (poem)
- **Child/teen death**
mentioned.....*The Darkest Part of the River*
Of the Many Faces
- **Murder**
mentioned.....*The Darkest Part of the River*
The Girl and the Wolf
- **Sexual assault/harassment**
attempted.....*The Girl and the Wolf*

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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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