

The Crow's Quill



SEPTEMBER 2021 WITCHES AND CAULDRONS

A HISTORY OF WITCHES

A brief history explained by Cassandra L. Thompson and a lesson on Modern Witchcraft by the lovely dark poetess & resident witch, Melanie Whitlock.

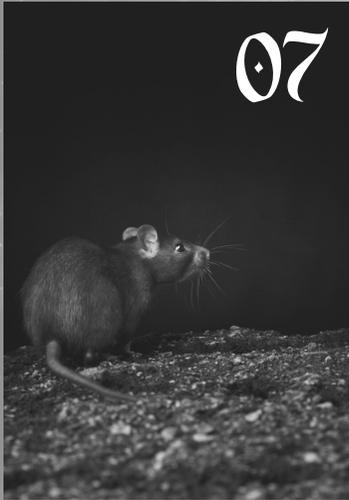
EERIE TALES OF WITCHCRAFT

Eight short stories teeming with magic & malice..

POET SPOTLIGHT

Exclusive Marie Casey Q&A and poetry by two honored members of The Dark Poet Society.

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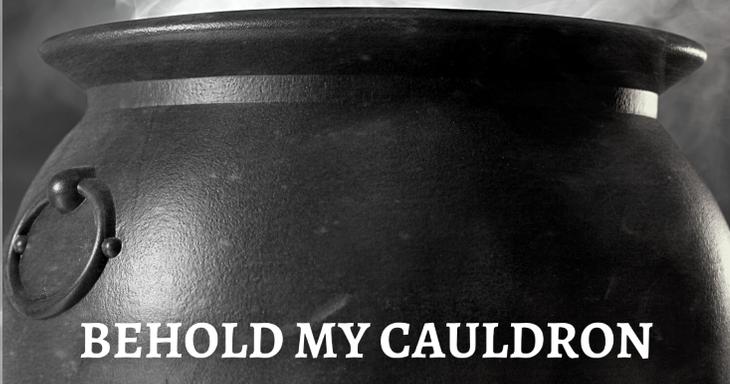
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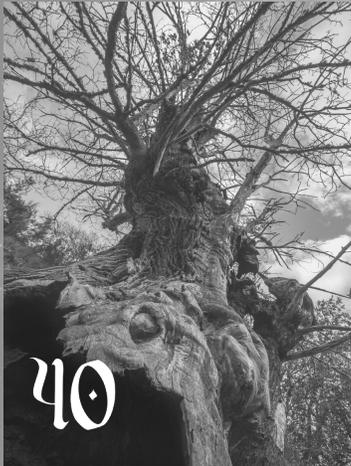
*"Curious concoctions
Mixtures and myths
Materials from far afield
Ingredients that the forest yields"*



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LETTER FROM THE CROW

*Independent
Rebellious
Dreadful*

Before we dive into stories morbid, magical, and macabre, I wanted to take an opportunity to step out of the realm of fiction and bring a little awareness to something that has always been important to me: goddess-based spirituality and witchcraft. From Macbeth to Hocus Pocus, it's hard to deny that society loves the concept of witches. Something about a woman who can command the forces of nature with her fingertips is intriguing, exciting... wicked, even. But the true history of women and witchcraft paint a far grimmer picture than nose warts and broomsticks. I felt it would be exploitative to have a magazine that includes the concept of witches without honoring the women history once ignored.



I'd like to do so first with a brief piece on the history of witchcraft and end with a take on modern witchcraft penned by my beloved "witch sis", Melanie Whitlock.

I've attempted a couple research papers on witchcraft's tumultuous history and early sources are always difficult to find. Perhaps the answer to this lies within the history of Westernized religion itself. The rise of Christianity had much to do with shaping the Western world; as the fledgling religion's influence began to dominate many regions across the globe, the original pagan practices were quickly abolished and absorbed into what many leaders hoped would become an accepted national belief system. Over time, many stubborn practitioners of paganism or goddess-based mythology were violently persecuted in an attempt to force total Christian conversion, while leaders attempted to distort the general view of whom they referred to as 'heathens'.

LETTER FROM THE CROW

Many symbols of pagan religions and deities were reimagined as symbols of the Devil, the Christian manifestation of evil. Pagan gods were referred to as false idols, goddesses became malevolent sorceresses, and medicine women who practiced any kind of healing were monstrous witches and baby killers. The fear of death or deliverance into Christian Heaven kept these mindsets alive; in fact, they still exist today. Anything classified as ‘occult practice’, such as astrology, divination, fortune telling, modern witchcraft, etc., is viewed either negatively or as something frivolous and trivial.

One of the darkest chapters in this history is the witch craze that occurred from 1550-1650 in various places across the globe. These persecuted women were not actually witches in any sense of the word—in fact many of them had been peaceful, Christian women of little threat. Without getting too far down the rabbit hole, there were many factors at play to why these women were targeted, such as a single woman running her own apothecary or inheriting lucrative property. It wasn’t hard to push these women into a villainous archetype that would allow for their demise, one that city officials could profit from. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (a wicked publication penned by dastardly religious men) fueled by a desire to maintain social norms regarding women, then perpetuated by stories of women admitting to these deeds under torture, created a perfect storm that allowed communities to construct and maintain the witch archetype we know today.

We tell stories of witches, demons, and wicked women, and can enjoy them, but let us never forget what the erroneous ideas of men did to countless women throughout history.

We can fear and enjoy the Witch... but we do best not to forget her.

Dreadfully Yours,

CASSANDRA L. THOMPSON
EDITOR IN CHIEF
PUBLISHER
FOUNDER
THE CROW



THE QUILLS

Quill & Crow Publishing House is a quaint and curious press dedicated to promoting the integrity of independent literature. Specializing in all things gothic and macabre, we strive to preserve the upmarket prose while lifting up voices often unheard. Quill & Crow is not your typical publishing house. Not only because we love bleeding heart poetry and all things odd & macabre, but because we are family. Each one of us brings something amazing & unique to the table.

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

...and we will probably feed you.



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Weeping Poetess, demon weed. Author of Broken Things & Broken Heart Mosaics.



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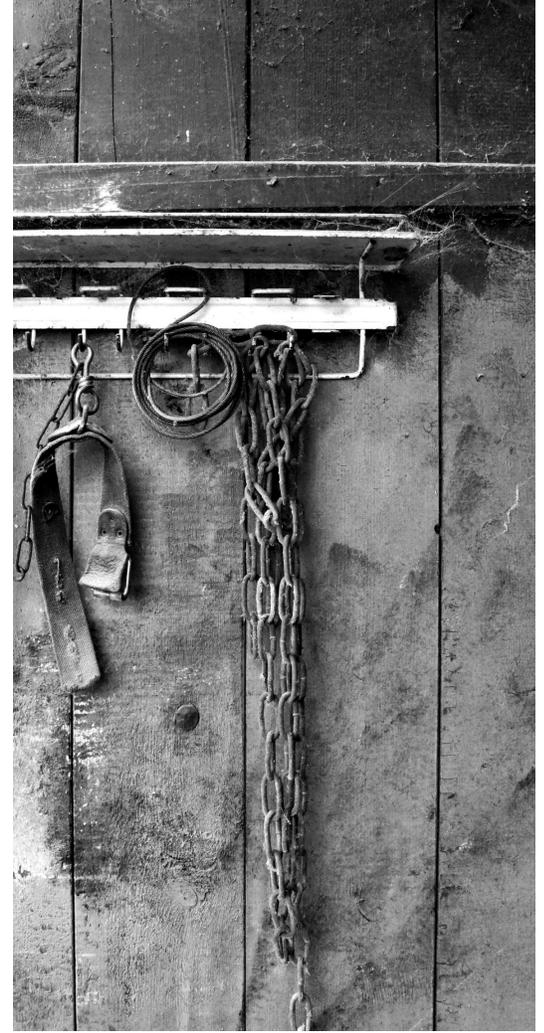


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Assistant Editor, dark poet, fantasy author, dragon of darkness in human form.

In His Hands



Written by Rebecca Jones-Howe

Usually, when Giles found a woman alone in the woods, he tackled them to the ground and had his way. Forearm to throat, he'd lean over their defeated figures. Their eyes begged and pleaded, only to bulge when their dying gasps acknowledged that he was not a good man. He kissed them after, and arranged sticks around them.

Witch's victims, the town thought.

Dorcas was different. She hissed and scratched. She called him evil, called him vile. She ripped hair from his scalp and he smashed her head against a rock in response. She sank, eyes closed, not acknowledging him at all. A crow called from the tree above. It cocked its head, curious.

Giles carried Dorcas home in darkness. She woke when he bound her in the cellar. She didn't beg or plead. She just curled herself into the fetal position, whimpering in wait.

Giles fell asleep to the sound.

" He turned her body off the ladder. The crowd roared as she struggled against the rope's unforgiving hold. Giles wished it were his hands receiving glory instead."

By morning, her name slipped through the village. The people all prayed in circles, hoping she'd be found safe.

On the third day, Giles heard scrambling in the cellar. He climbed down the rickety wooden steps with his lantern, stirring his hostage awake. A black rat squeaked. Dorcas glanced at the creature before lifting her gaze to meet his. She curled herself into the corner, her skirts twisting up her legs, revealing the blood she'd spilled at the moon's call.

Giles stepped back, trampling the rat beneath his boot. Its shriek of death clawed at his insides.

"Please do not look upon my shame," Dorcas begged, tugging at the stained linen.

He hurried back up the steps and brought her a bowl of water, a cloth, a tunic. He gave her the lantern and locked her away, giving her time to cleanse the blood from her skin.



She called upon him in the morning. Another rat squeaked. Giles felt the scratch in his chest, claws to an itch, but he forced himself to open the door. Dorcas knelt in submission. His tunic hung off her narrow shoulders, exposing her skin to the candlelight. He crouched before her, then reached for the slender curve of her neck.

"Art thou going to kill me?" she asked.

He wanted to. Her neck fit so perfectly in his grasp. Giles tightened his hold until her pulse raced in her throat, beating in time with his.

"Thou art naught like the others," he said.

The candle flickered, making her lips look like a smile. He moved to wipe them to see if it was real, but a bell rang outside, somber and chilling.

There was another witch to hang.



He pulled the black hood over his head, then went to the gallows to drape his noose over the neck of the accused. She begged. She pleaded. She looked Giles in the eye, but through the hood, he was a nobody. A stranger. He turned her body off the ladder. The crowd roared as she struggled against the rope's unforgiving hold.

Giles wished it were his hands receiving glory instead.

He walked home. A crow called from the nearby tree, cocking its head in mockery.

Giles unlocked the door to find that Dorcas had freed herself from the cellar. She had prepared him dinner instead of escaping. She poured beer into a cup and ushered him into his seat.

"Doth this please thee?" she asked.

Warily, Giles picked up his fork. The meat was tender and spiced, the bread hot and buttered. He sipped the beer, allowing the warming touch of the alcohol to soothe the ache in his chest.

"It wouldst please me more if thee ate with me," Giles said, nodding at the empty chair beside him.

Dorcas shook her head. She looked at him and smiled a real smile, one that made his heart race. "I cannot eat with the devil," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Giles winced, but Dorcas's brown eyes absorbed him. He couldn't look away.

"Thou art the devil," she said. "I searched for the devil in the woods and thou found me."

The meat turned rancid beneath his nose. He glanced at his plate, at the maggots that now twitched between the sinews. He groaned and pushed the plate back, bile filling his throat.

"Doth I please thee?" she asked, reaching for the drawstring of the tunic. She unwound it, freeing a shoulder, freeing her chest. She had a mole on her neck. A witch's mark. A place for the Devil to suckle. A place he desired most of all.

"Art thou my devil, Giles?"

He hesitated at first, smelling metal. Then he licked his lips. He eased out of his chair, but stumbled to his knees before her. She lowered the tunic further, allowing him to kiss her stomach, her breasts. He rose and pressed his lips to her neck. He licked at the darkened teat, which satiated the need in him, the itch inside of him. A flood of warmth slipped into his veins. Desire captured his lungs, his muscles, and he clung to her breathlessly, suckling at the savory taste of glory on her flesh.

"I will never let thee go," he said.

She wrapped her arms around him, cradling him as she took his ache away.



In the morning, Giles sat in the courtroom as the crowd searched another woman for marks. They tore at her clothes and she twisted and shrieked. The people in the stands watched with wide eyes, their faces red with rage. They pointed. They accused the woman of killing Dorcas, but the woman professed her innocence. She begged. Pleaded.

They called her a Proud Slut. The Devil's Slave.

A witch.

Giles knew he would be hanging her soon. The crowd's deluded desire clawed at his chest, driving all the blood to his loins. He removed himself from the court and quickly sought refuge in the woods. He unfastened his trousers and pressed his forehead to the trunk of a tree, trying to work his bestial lust into release.

Above him, a crow called. Giles glanced up, trying to catch his breath. The crow glared from the branch, its beaded black eyes like dark windows.

"I am the Devil," Giles said. "She hath called me her Devil."

The crow cocked its head, questioning.



He tried to kiss her lips, but she turned away.

"The Devil dost not kiss," she said. "Thy Devil licks. Thy Devil feasts upon my flesh." She combed her fingers through his hair and took a seat on the edge of the mattress. She removed the tunic and guided him to kneel so he could kiss the tender flesh between her thighs.

Her skin was ripe with freckles, moles, passages in which he could lose himself. He pulled her legs around him like walls. He licked at her folds until her gasps of pleasure flooded warmth into his mouth.

He drank until his thirst was wracked with heaving sobs.



The next morning, he pulled his noose over the throat of the newly accused witch.

She begged and pleaded. She took all the attention from the crowd. Giles pushed her off the ladder and everything ceased. The chants faded. The witch spun in circles, her reddened face becoming a blur.

All his power meant nothing without glory.

The crowd faded, leaving him alone with the witch's body. Usually, he left them up to set an example for the passersby. Instead, Giles cut her down and threw her into his wheelbarrow. He took her to the mountainside and he stared into the witch's empty eyes. They didn't acknowledge him, but instead looked to the gray clouded sky above, where a crow cawed.

Giles refused to turn.

He tossed the witch down the hillside and ran home to the woman who had pledged her life to him, her body a full feast of distraction.



A bewitched boy thrashed on the courtroom floor. Giles watched the child, certain that he was only acting in an attempt to accuse the woman on the stand.

"She speaks to the animals! The creatures! She lets them suckle upon her!"

Giles swallowed. He couldn't catch his breath. Again, he removed himself. He passed through the woods, thinking only of Dorcas, his servant, his kept woman.

Usually, when Giles returned, he opened the door to find her naked in bed, her arms spread wide in offering.

This time the sheets were stained with red that spilled from between her legs. A rat squeaked. Dorcas cradled its girth in her palm. She cooed and gently stroked the rat's fur as its eager mouth suckled upon the mole on her throat.

"Slut!" Giles cried. He ran to the bed, grabbing the rat. Its body contorted. It scratched at his arms, but he slammed it down on the floor and hammered his boot over the creature's squeals.

Dorcas shifted, her smile widening, her laugh filling the room.

"Thou art a witch!" he screamed, grabbing her throat. He pushed until her eyes bulged.

"My Devil!" she laughed. "Oh, my Devil!" She reached up and touched his shoulders, smearing blood on his tunic and face. "Drink upon me! All of me! All of my shame! Taste it, Giles! Drink upon me, you stupid, foolish man!"

She forced his head between her legs, forcing him to lap at the red. He was thirsty, so thirsty, so in need of release. He drank without abandon, feeling as though he would starve if he didn't lick every drop of her wine.



He rolled over in the morning, his mouth tasting of coins. Red was still pasted to his lips.

Dorcas still lay asleep beside him. Rats shrieked around the bed. He grabbed her hair and pulled her off the mattress, across the floor, to the center of town. He threw her naked figure upon the ground and pointed.

"She's a witch!" he cried. "She bewitched me! She seduced me!"

The townspeople came, voices wary. Whispers fluttered, but Giles shouted the truth until the congregation grabbed her and dragged her toward the jail. She hollered and shrieked like the others. Her screams beat at the overcast skies. He followed, his heart throbbing, his chest aching.

The only way to soothe the pain of his jealousy was to rage with the mob.

"The Devil's Slave! A Proud Slut!"



He forced himself to cry in testimony.

"She found me in the woods. I could not help but take her home. She stole my appetite. She filled my home with vile creatures and made me feast upon her. Then she let the rats feast upon her. I beg of thee to forgive me!"

It was all the people needed to convict.

Days later, he held Dorcas on the ladder, his black hood over his head. Only Dorcas knew he was Giles Downing, the town's killer. It was all he wanted in the beginning. He tightened his grasp around her waist, thinking of the rat, the way it sat so lovingly perched on her palm. His chest burned and he pushed her off the ladder, away from his hold and into the strangle of the noose.

Dorcas drew a breath instead of choking.

"The Devil is in me!" she cried. "The Devil taketh me!" Her body contorted. Her muscles clenched and flexed. She writhed against the rope, which was no longer an extension of Giles's hand. Her breasts heaved. Her muscles spasmed. Her eyes begged, pleaded, only to bulge in delight when Death's caress finally combed her body with undulations of gracious release.

Giles felt no blood in his loins. He felt no need for glory, only the penetrating weight of shame against his chest.

In His Hands

Rebecca Jones-Howe

Desperately, he rushed to cut her down. Her pulse no longer beat with his. Her dead eyes stared not at him, but at the sky above, where a crow watched from the tree.

It cawed and cocked its head, its black eyes glistening, reflecting him, a cuckold.



-Meet- Rebecca Jones-Howe



Neo-noir writer and author of *Vile Men*. Her stories have appeared in *PANK*, *Dark Moon Digest*, and in *The New Black* anthology of Neo-noir fiction. Writer of the "Grown-Ass V.C. Andrews Review" series.

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Calderone



Written by David Andrews

Elena smiled when she saw him wake. His round cheeks red from rubbing against the mattress as he slept, giving him a cherub-like appearance. She thought Miro resembled his father and shuddered at the thought. She missed

him, but understood why he had to go. It was the way. It had always been the way.

“Good morning, little one. Remember today is the Great Festival. You will finally get to go to the magical place above us.”

Miro, being only six years old, responded with a jubilant, “Yea!”

“Now Miro, there will be many games to play, other children, and much to eat, but you must remember what I told you. When the sun falls below the horizon, disappearing into the great sea, there are important and serious things that will happen. We talked about this. Do you remember what I told you?”

“Yes, Mommy. I do. I’ll be a good boy and play with my friends.”

“Elena had never met her father. Her mother had never met her father. This story was the same for all residents of Calderone.”

“Good. Now let’s get going.”

The small town of Calderone was built into the side of a tall cliff that rested along the Tyrrhenian Sea. Rows of houses wended with the curvature of the bluff, one after another, ascending to its peak where a stately castle looked out at the sea. Even when the sun rode high on a cloudless day, its basalt stone cast obscure shadows over the town.

Elena grabbed Miro’s hand and walked out the front door onto the dirt streets of the only place she had ever set foot. Each day she woke up to aquamarine glistening in her eyes, the salt of its brackish essence drifting in her nostrils, and its baritone groans beating in her ears as waves slapped against the shoreline. The heavy sound of moving water reminded her of Miro’s father’s voice, and evoked thoughts of her own father. Elena had never met him. Her mother had never met her father. This story was the same for all residents of Calderone.

The beauty of this place was only surmounted by its inhabitants. As they walked the street, there were many women around them, each with a look that complemented Elena’s. Their faces were bronzed, with flowing golden locks of hair wafting around their necks, twisting and flipping from the ever present sea breeze. They wore similar dresses, different shades of white, which floated about their waists as they walked the winding paths together toward the castle looming above.

Mixed with the myriad of women were several young boys. From toddlers to teenagers, all of them had light hair, some almost white, and others closer to beige. They weaved in and out of the crowd, disappearing and appearing again, blending with the women in an ethereal dance.

As Elena walked, she noticed her friend Isabella waddling just ahead of her. She hurried to catch up, and when she was several feet from her, she shouted out, “Izzy, wait!”

Isabella abruptly turned, exposing a protruding, round belly which she supported with both hands. Her bright blue eyes illuminated by the blazing sun looked directly into Elena’s similar, yet dimmer cobalt eyes.

“Hi, Elena. I’m glad you found me.”

“Iz, why didn’t you stop at my house like we talked about? I told you I would walk the path with you. I did it just a few years ago when I was with child, and I know how difficult and lonely it can be.”

Isabella replied, “I guess I just have a lot on my mind. I walked right past your house and totally forgot I said I would meet up with you.”

Elena nodded her head. “I understand. There is an arduous, yet necessary choice to be made today. Have you and Husband figured things out?”

“Not entirely. We obviously want what is best for our child, but there are so many factors. You know this already. I don’t know why I’m carrying on. How do you feel now, about the choice you made, you know, after having a boy?”

Elena's mouth tilted slightly downward before speaking, "Izzy, that was a chance we had to take, and I don't regret it. Look at my little Miro, the most beautiful boy in Calderone. He can choose when he gets older, and at least live among us until he is a man. Once he is grown, he can leave us or retire to the cottage. A choice wholly his own. I am satisfied I didn't make the choice for him."

As they continued their walk, Miro skipped along, carefree, as his blonde hair bounced at each gallop. The path turned to the final ledge of the cliff. It hung just below the sprawling castle and its elaborate grounds. In the middle of this path, was a cottage. It had only one window and a door. Its basic structure paled in comparison to the ornate dwellings below it — an ugly appendage on a hillside of splendor.

As they passed the dwelling, dismembered forms of men huddled at the window, peering out as phantoms who were forbidden to connect with those passing by.

On seeing them, the whites of Miro's eyes expanded, his skin blanched, and voice stuttered as he struggled to get out the words, "Mommy, there are scary things looking at me." His little finger pointed in the direction of the apparitions.

Elena abruptly grabbed Miro's quivering hand. "Miro, we do not look at that place. I told you just before the castle there is a home for the sacrificial, a space we do not look at, a place we do not think about."

"But Mommy, they were boys like me, but older. Some of them didn't have eyes, some no noses — they had holes in their faces. Another waved at me, but his hand wasn't there. I don't like that place. I never want to go there, ever!"

Elena sighed, and answered, "Child, put that out of your mind now. We have a festival to get to. You are going to have so much fun. Let's think of what is just around this corner. No more talk of that place. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mommy."

Still, as she told her son to forget, a sadness rose within her, but drifted back, deep inside, when she thought of the decision she had made for him while he was still in her womb. The fear that Miro had shown over the cottage gave validation to the choice they made. She knew he would never go there. She knew one day, she would miss him more than she missed his father, but it was the way. It was always the way. It was the only way. He would give all of himself, just like his father, and that would be enough.

As they made the final turn to the castle grounds, the scent of rosemary and blooming oleanders drifted in the air, causing the grim portion of the path to fade from their minds. Once they stood on the grounds, they looked out to a sprawling field dotted with a variety of flowers and fruit trees. The young boys from the town were already busy at play. Most of them surrounded a large fountain set just in front of the entrance to the castle.

Elena looked down at Miro and said, "Hey, why don't you go play with your friends. There is Carlo and Bastian over there by the fountain. Go ahead, get going. Have some fun. This is a day to celebrate."

Before Elena had finished speaking, Miro was running towards the children.

She turned and looked at Isabella and spoke, “Well, I guess you better get inside and meet up with Nicolo ... sorry, I mean, Husband.”

Isabella responded, “I’ve had difficulty not saying his name myself. Ever since we wed and he became nameless ... it’s just hard, you know?”

Elena managed to pull a half smile to her face. “I do know. But don’t waste any more time here with me— we have forever. You only have hours left with Husband. I know you both will make the right choice for him, for the baby, and most importantly, for all of us.”

Isabella didn’t say anything. She turned and walked past the fountain, up the stone staircase, and knocked on the door before disappearing into the hollows of the castle.

Dusk descended over the town. The trees and the fountain cast eerie shadows that mixed with the silhouettes of people, projecting a haunting jitter of demon-like figures over the grounds. A horn sounded, and everyone looked up to a balcony placed just above the main entryway, protruding from the wall of the castle like a stage waiting for an actor to appear.

Within seconds, the balcony door swung open and she appeared, Adreana the High Priestess. In a place where light was prevailing, she exuded darkness. It wasn’t only her waist-length obsidian hair, which flowed over and contrasted her porcelain skin, her wide sapphire eyes, or the long black gown she wore that brought a feeling of dark reverence to the crowd. She carried with her a regal energy that spread around her, and drew people to her.

As she stood gazing out past the crowd, the moon hung in the sky, full and pale, reflecting in the distant sea. The night matched her spirit, and without a word spoken, the women of the town walked toward her. Now standing directly in front of the balcony, the mass of converged yellow heads kneeled, waiting for their queen to speak.

Finally, and after a few minutes of contemplative gazing, Adreana spoke.

“Welcome, family. It is again, on the night when the moon speaks, that we must listen. The time we pull from it and pull from him, so that we might forever live in the grace of the beauty of the sun.”

The entrance to the castle opened, and Adreana disappeared from view. The women stood up and filed into the entryway. Elena, among the crowd, was swept into the antechamber. She hesitated because Miro was not by her side, but her mind left him as the call of the castle and its master pulled her into its belly.

Once inside, the women gathered in a large dining room. Several women dressed in plain black dresses with accompanying aprons carried carafes of wine, watching and waiting for a guest in need of refill. Their hands showed signs of aging. It was a trait uncommon in the women of the town, a sign that there were potential consequences to not making the right decision, to him not giving his all.

At the head of the table sat Adreana, and to her right, sat Isabella. The only sounds came from an extensive fireplace. The fire inside it raged, cracking, and hissing as it slapped at an immense cast iron cauldron hanging just over the flames.

Adreana rose and spoke. “Each year, we gather here to bear witness to a sacrifice. The world outside of Calderone is controlled by men, women mere fodder for their appetites. For as long as the world has existed, they have taken from us. But here, we live in opposition to this patriarchy.

“When a boy reaches maturity, and is fit to marry, he comes to live here. I choose his wife, and they are married in silence on the balcony where I greeted you. The marriage must be consummated with my guidance. Once the mother is with child, we meet here on this day, and cast a blessing over the town with this ritual.

“The cauldron is ready, having been filled with the bits and pieces of things required in my spell. It only requires the substance of sacrifice from the father of the unborn to complete it.”

As Adreana paused, a man walked into the room. Elena recognized him, Nicolo, Isabella’s husband. It had only been months since Elena had seen him, but in that time his youthfulness had given way to a mature and wearied countenance.

Adreana again spoke. “Will you give all of yourself freely, or shall the women of this coterie convene to trial, where the cauldron is the High Judge, having final say over what parts of you will satisfy the moon?”

As Adreana was speaking, Elena thought back to the previous year, and the husband who chose the trail, contemplating how his blood sprayed as he hacked at his wrist, struggling to separate it from his arm. She wondered if he regretted not fully submitting after he carved out his right eye.

Nicolo bowed his head and in a low voice that echoed through the stone walls of the hall said, “I will give all of myself.”

“Very good, then,” reasoned Adreana.

Elena, exhaled. Not realizing until that moment that she had been holding her breath.

The women did not get up from their seats. Nicolo walked over to the cauldron, looked inside at the murky water, now violently boiling, and without hesitation, threw himself into the scalding elixir.

The shrill scream lasted for only a moment. Within minutes, his flesh had neatly parted from his bones. Upon seeing it, Adreana declared, “It is time to feast!”

The women rose with bowls in their hands, and gathered into a line. They waited for their High Priestess to spoon them a serving of what would keep them young, would keep them beautiful — would keep them from forever being servants of men.



-Meet- David Andrews



David Andrews is an accidental writer who spends his lunch breaks pondering the world so he can create stories and melancholy poetry by nightfall. An avid sports fan, when he is not writing, he enjoys running and spending time with his family and dogs.

Twitter: @pensivemourning

Sacrifice



Written by Lucas Mann

The air was unnaturally still, as if the forest was holding its breath, nervously anticipating the gathering. We walked single file down the path, immersed in the light of the harvest moon. My view was obscured by the figure in front of me, the dark green hooded cloak appearing black in the silver light, a shadow guiding me to the forbidden sanctuary.

She moved fluidly around the circle, challenging each of us in turn. When she reached me, I tried to stand as still as the others, but had an overwhelming urge to flee. This was only tempered by the branches of the trees reaching toward us, threatening to hold me in place if I attempted to run. Her eyes bored into mine. Smoky trails of charcoal swirled through them as she searched. Finding what she wanted, she tipped her head to the side and the smoke disappeared, replaced by a glimmering light deep inside their darkness.

“It will be you.” She turned and strode back toward the middle of the circle.

“This is the point in your lives where you must make a choice. Join the world in its descent into darkness, or let your powers die along with the dormancy of nature.”

Obediently, I followed, taking one step forward, unsure of how far to go.

The High Priestess noticed my trepidation and filled with fury, her eyes becoming pools of scarlet, matching her robe. She pointed to the ground next to her and I hurried to take my place. She placed her hand on my shoulder. Her fingernails were long and sharp like talons, dark gray, discolored from years of experimentation with potions. She extended her other arm and whispered a spell. Energy drained from me. My knees buckled, but I succeeded in remaining upright. In front of us a bonfire had ignited, its flames exacerbating the gaunt expressions on the witches still in formation around the circle. The High Priestess's lips turned ever so slightly, an acknowledgment of how difficult it had been to withstand her theft of my power.

With an open hand, she gestured to the girl still floating in front of us, very close to the bonfire. I had nearly forgotten about her, she had been so quiet and still. She was on her back, arms crossed in front of her, palms flat on her chest. No more than seven years of age, she wore a terrified expression. Her mouth was slightly open and her eyes were wide, a single tear streaming down her cheek.

The High Priestess closed her hand into a fist and the girl jerked upright, now perpendicular to the ground. She looked as if she were going to simultaneously burst into tears or vomit, but due to the paralysis spell, was unable to do either. Her eyes locked with mine, pleading for help. I couldn't tell if she was in physical pain, but the terror was plain to see. The High Priestess twirled her fingers and a cauldron emerged from the flames. It hovered slightly above the tendrils of the fire as they licked at it, liquid beginning to simmer inside.

"You know what must be done, Vizsla," the High Priestess whispered in my ear. "Sacrifice is inevitable." Her hand on my shoulder gripped and pulled me closer. "If you cannot, it will be done by the next in line. So do, or do not. Eventually, it will be done."

I could not break eye contact with the girl. An innocent, likely captured from the local village, was to be murdered here tonight. Everything I had worked for was at stake. Countless generations of my ancestors had been put to this test and now the task was on me. Seeing this child here was not a surprise. I had known since I was her age what I would have to do. My friends and I had joked about this very situation. But deep in my mind, I hoped it would not be me that would be chosen. Even though I had always known it would be.

"Do it." She enunciated each consonant so crisply, I could feel her breath on my skin. "Each moment you delay is further evidence you are just like your mother. She was weak and so are you."

I finally tore my eyes from the girl and glared at the High Priestess, who was holding out a ladle, offering it to me. My anger emboldened me. "My mother was stronger than you'll ever be. Her compassion was not weakness. You murdered her because you knew it was the only way you could be more powerful than she was."

She twitched as she bridled at my defiance, causing a lock of onyx colored hair to tumble out from under her hood and drape lifelessly across her breast. “Then what is your choice, Vizsla? If you do not complete this task, you will relinquish your abilities and lose your opportunity to avenge her.”

I wanted to kill her right there. So angry I couldn’t see or think straight, I closed my eyes and forced myself to take a deep breath. She was right. And I hated it. The only way to defeat her would be to murder this innocent child, whose only crime was being born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I took the ladle and focused on the girl. I knew the spell. All I had to do was say it. Then I would become powerful enough to kill the High Priestess and abolish this barbaric ritual forever. There had to be a better way than this.

I dipped the ladle into the simmering liquid, its rust color appeared to corrode the metal. Approaching the girl, I reached out and placed my hand on her cheek, wiping the tear away. She whimpered softly, her only defense against me. “Hush, sweetling. This won’t hurt at all and will be over very soon.”

Holding the ladle to her mouth, I poured in the brew. She tried to spit it out, but with so much poured in so quickly, she had no choice but to swallow. I brushed her golden hair off her forehead, let my fingers linger over her temple, and closed my eyes. The words came out easily. I could feel her soul leave her body and pass through mine. I searched her body for any last remnants before I let go.

Opening my eyes, I saw my own face. My old face. My hand was still on the girl’s forehead, now my forehead. The pressure felt light and she began to withdraw her hand with a shocked expression. I shook my head subtly. I had left behind enough of my consciousness that I was able to communicate with her telepathically.

“No. You are Vizsla now. You know the spell. Finish me and it will be your quest to vanquish the High Priestess.”

Her bewildered expression turned to understanding as she read my memories. She nodded and returned her hand to my temple. A blinding light flashed as the brew was activated by her words and I lost consciousness, collapsing to the ground.

As my soul left the girl’s body, I could hear my mother calling to me from above. Calling me to come home, just as she had for dinner when I was a small child. A bright light came toward me, enveloping me. I saw my mother’s eyes in the star, tearful as she took hold of me. I rose to greet her, then remembered the scene I was escaping from. Looking down, I saw the High Priestess embracing my old body, now inhabited by the little girl.

“Yes, mother. It is me.”

“Then it came to pass just as I anticipated. Our only worthy adversary has been eliminated. You can now live the rest of your days with the combination of your natural power and the talent you have gained from Vizsla. You will be unstoppable and rise unchallenged to the throne.”

Before I could react, my mother pulled me away. I tried to struggle, but there was no breaking her embrace. Realizing there was nothing we could do, I turned back to her. Normally I was comforted by her familiar scent of fresh baked bread and butterscotch, but something was different. Spoiled milk and mildew permeated through, bringing an overwhelming feeling of despair. I looked into her eyes, her entire face now visible. Rivulets of tears streamed down her cheeks, the disappointment clear in her expression. I recalled times as a child when she was angry with me, but this was much worse. She had never looked at me this way. Now, as I passed into the afterlife, this would be my legacy. My family's legacy. We had lost and would exist in this realm of failure for the rest of eternity.



-Street- Lucas Mann



Lucas Mann lives in the beautiful Finger Lakes region of NY. In the abundant free time typical of being a parent of four children, physical therapist, and farmer, he enjoys writing in a mixture of genres. He is currently finishing a novel that is planned for release later this year.

<https://lucasmann.carrd.co/>

BEHOLD MY CAULDRON

Behold my cauldron
Pewter creator of worlds
Where magic manifests
And evil's put to rest

Tarnished now
Imperfections mar its sheen
But disregard the outer skin
Its beauty lives within

Curious concoctions
Mixtures and myths
Materials from far afield
Ingredients that the forest yields

Eye of newt?
Hm, not my forte
I take a much greener approach
Energies from flowers encroach

Mix my tonics to soothe your hurts
Keep you from ill or harm
Protective like a pauldron
Such power from my cauldron

WRITTEN BY SOPHIE BROOKES



Poet Spotlight



SOPHIE BROOKES

Questions by Marie Casey

1. If you were a ghost, what would be your message for the ouija board?

My message would be "Did you bring snacks?"

2. There is an awful smell coming from your basement, what is decaying down there?

The awful smell is the body of the last person who told me that there's no money/future in poetry.

3. Does poetry come to you in an assaulting manner or are you a normal person?

Yes, poetry most definitely comes to me in an assaulting manner! It demands to be written once the thought sparks in my head!

Follow and Support

-Sophie Brookes-

Gothic poet. Writer of many works in progress, finisher of none.

Lover of all things dark and spooky, and flannel shirts.

Twitter @ladyxesphio

<http://sophiebrookeswrites.com>

All Souls' Night



Written by Han Adcock

No ghosts come to my house now, except my own. The moon is halfway to setting. I draw the curtains. I light the candles. This is like a replay of a first date. My first day, on the eve of the first of the old New Year. I take the chair facing the dining-room doorway, the vacant seat opposite as still as a monument to silence.

I've been waiting for my visitor since the grandfather clock in the hall chimed midnight. I couldn't go to bed. Too nervous to sleep, knowing the hour of the next year of eternity is soon to begin.

Necessary preparations have all been made. I've eaten nothing for twelve hours, and drunk only watered-down wine. I bathed in painfully cold rainwater collected from the garden butt, infused with herbs, and I haven't combed my hair for a week. I danced around the house wearing a white dress, anti-clockwise, seven times seven laps.

"I danced around the house wearing a white dress, anti-clockwise, seven times, seven laps. This is a ritual I have to do to keep him away."

This is a ritual I have to do to keep him away. Let him in for one night. However, the midnight hour is long past. Is he not coming? Has there been a delay? Relief and disappointment claw for space inside my chest.

A warm breeze blows through the window, pulling the curtains apart, extinguishing the candles. I get out of my seat to tug down the sash and re-ignite the wicks. A movement occurs behind me.

I glance back, not seeing anybody.

Perhaps he won't be coming tonight.

I return to the table in the shadows.

His face hovers above the empty chair and sinks to meet my eye. It is almost indecipherable, light from the flames dancing on a form that is all depth and no discernible surface.

My heart dances. All the fine hairs on my arms, neck, and legs stiffen and crackle with something akin to lightning. I don't know whether that's good or bad. It's him.

"You're here," I whisper. I can't breathe, can't swallow.

His voice doesn't come from his mouth, if that dark patch there is a mouth. It emanates from the corners of the room, ringing in the center of my head.

"It's been a year."

I pour him soured milk mixed with wine. It's what they nourish themselves with, where he has to live. I dripped a little of my blood into the glass earlier this evening, the cut at the base of my thumb still pink and throbbing.

"Why did you do it, Larin? Why did you sell me? Why send me away?"

This is always his first question. Every year, he asks three questions. If I can avoid answering them with his name by the time the moon sets, I'm safe for another year, until All Souls' Night comes around again.

"Why don't I show you around? You must be curious to find out what's changed." I open the door, feeling him follow me into the kitchen, around the back garden, into the storage shed.

He drifts to the back, where old paint tins and tool-boxes cast inanimate shadows, savouring, remembering, and I have to linger. This was the place where we first bid each other goodbye.

"This is where..." He hovers by the black, circular stain on the planks, burned there five years ago when I was a younger, bitter woman, wanting to find a way to outlast a warlock who had left me and caused my son to leave home.

"This is where you separated us. It was unnatural. We are unnatural."

"It's the only way we can last forever," I say.

"Only in a half-life. It is far worse for you than for me."

I take him back into the house, up the stairs, through the skylight, onto the roof garden. The stair-carpet sings and hisses under the impressions his feet make, and I worry to myself

about his last remark. How is it worse for me? What could be worse than Hell?

On the roof, we stand and watch the moon. It is yellow, balancing on the horizon. He's not looking at the moon, but at me.

"Don't you love me? I am you. Don't you love yourself?"

The second question.

"Of course I do."

"That's a lie. We would be whole if you did."

"Apart, we can experience more and travel to more places than we ever could together."

"You might. I can't, trapped across the border, under earth, with flames and magma and dead dragons, cold bale-fires and worms bigger than—"

"Come and look at the orchids, they're wonderful." I lead him to the door of the glasshouse.

He peers in, humouring me. "I can't enjoy those. They are grey to me, and I know they are to you, too. You can't appreciate the world through your senses, because they are not with you. I am your senses."

"We've had this argument before."

"Larin, you did this to us out of anger. It's not too late to undo it and have me back. Please."



The Hyades Border controls the flow of immigration between the Dead and the Living. My job was to sit behind a desk and check people's papers. I saw a lot of old souls and a lot of infants. I had to turn away a lot of corpses that were falling apart, with limbs, eyes, and teeth missing and an unwholesome reek. Occasionally, there was trouble— Dead citizens making violent threats, Living folk trying to demand friends and relatives back— but I had never been a target for that.

Until, one summer evening, I was. Stephen had arrived to relieve me and was hanging his jacket up in the office.

The next in the queue was Dead, recently passed over, flesh still intact but a strange, grey colour like mixed-up plasticine, a strong aroma whenever he opened his mouth, like leaf-mould. His jaw hung off its hinges. He had to move his mouth with one hand.

"Let me through."

"Do you have papers?"

"Let me pass. Or I'll bite you."

My heart rose, choking me. "I'm afraid you'll have to apply for a temporary work permit before I can let you through."

"I'm going to see my family, not working. I ain't coming back."

He was leaning over the counter now, his face looming over mine. A tiny worm threaded its way through his eyebrow. Flecks of grave-dirt and twitching maggots rained onto my work

station from his lank hair.

Stephen leaped onto the Dead man's back. They both went down, flailing. Gasps and screams issued from the waiting people, along with raucous laughter and calls of encouragement. A gristly, cracking sound. Stephen resurfaced, not shaking, not even out of breath, his eyes blue, calm, and steady. Bluer than necrosis.

"I should take a shower. I have broken the cadaver's neck, but I'll ask Clean-Up to sort it out on my way," he said, still looking at me. Those were the first words he ever said to me.

A week later, as I was about to go home, Stephen approached me.

"I know this is sudden... but would you like to come for a drink? I have time off tomorrow. How about it?"

I thought I trusted him.

My house is situated on Viadal Walk, an alley close to the Border. Psychic disturbances were common. I would often wake in the morning to find things had moved upstairs overnight. A few times, I'd be reading at the kitchen table and the cutlery would thrash about in the drawer. We only had wooden cutlery in those parts. A girl I called Mina would drift across the landing at three in the afternoon on a Thursday, but all of this stopped when Stephen moved in.

Magic repels that sort of activity.

He wasn't being truthful with me.

One night in Mardas, during the third month, we had dinner at a fancy restaurant. He watched me eat a three-course meal, and all he did was sip milk, then wine. I lost count of the glasses, but he wasn't tipsy, just calm, cool, and methodical, as always. His unchanging mannerisms had started to annoy me.

"Gods," I said. "It's like you're not even human."

He said nothing for a while, looking at me narrowly. An emptiness looked back at me from his pupils. Nausea opened within my stomach.

"Stephen?"

"Why do you think I do not eat? Nor have you seen me sleep. I thought you were aware of what I am."

"You're a warlock?"

He was. An immortal being, one of the people who separated from their souls at puberty and sent them to the realms of the Dead in a dream. They didn't do it deliberately, it was genetic. A hereditary blessing.

Or a curse.

I pitied him and I was jealous. I didn't want to die if he was going to live with other people after I was gone. Our relationship was a long fling. The realisation stung me to the core.

I began ordering books and magazines on Soul Separation and Life after Death, stockpiling supplies I'd need to do it to myself. One of the books contained an artificial

method. It was an old volume, frayed, no title on the cover, anonymous. A difficult volume to locate.

Stephen grew more distant, if that was possible. The most he said was four words in any night or morning or afternoon. He did not look happy to be with me any more.

Then he left. He didn't have the grace to wait for me to die first before moving on. He owned all the time on the Earth he wanted. I had another forty years, if I looked after myself well.

I went further than that. I made myself a witch.

That afternoon, I dragged the box of supplies to the shed—dodging past Mina, who seemed to be trying to waylay me, which wasn't like her—and performed the ritual. I lit candles, drew sigils, tore my soul out of my body, and sent it to Hell.

I was surprised to find my soul was male, but he didn't seem confused. I gave him a name, as the book said I must, sending him hurtling across the Border.

The world became flat and colourless.

Every Octord the thirty-first, he attempts to trick me into reabsorbing him. The first time it happened, I'd been on the roof watering the orchids, inhaling the night air, and he drifted through the gap in the door, frightening me to death, figuratively speaking.

Since then, I have been careful not to say the name I chose for him.



"Tell me my name, before I have to go."

The third question. We are walking downstairs now, the darkness gathering more thickly, the moonlight not filtering through the hall window.

"I don't know."

"You must. You said it when you pulled me out, I felt it. Tell me."

"I can't. I don't want to die."

"You've already died. This is not living."

"How do you know?"

"I still feel your thoughts. I know why you only work night shifts at Hell's gate. I know why you shun daylight."

"Enlighten me." I know he knows. Embarrassment squirms in my stomach.

"You're ashamed. You aren't human. The world is detached from you."

The darkness spins. I struggle to stand upright. I still hate Stephen, but I have to admit I didn't appreciate how hard his condition was, until I adopted it for myself. You have to be in a poor state of mind indeed to want to let go of your own soul.

All Souls' Night

Jan Strout

“Tell me my name!”

The moon is below the horizon now. His voice grows weaker and fainter, like that of a man falling under anaesthesia. I can hardly see him. Soon, I will be alone again.

My heart has taken enough beatings. I can't bring myself to mention the name of the man who inflicted the worst heart-beating.

No ghosts come to my house now, except my own. His name is Stephen.



-Street- Han Adcock



Han Adcock is a writer of short stories and longer fiction in the fantasy, sci-fi, and horror genres. His work has appeared in *The Siren's Call* ezine, *Ink Stains* Volume 13, and on the *Tales To Terrify* podcast. His fantasy novelette "Damian's Dream" is available on Amazon. He writes poetry under the name Hansen Tor Adcock and runs, edits, and illustrates *Once Upon A Crocodile* ezine.

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The Elder Witch



Written by William Bartlett

I bit down on my lower lip as hard as I could, combating the urge of hesitation. Pain like fire flashed through my torn skin and I welcomed the sharp taste of my own blood with relief. The laceration was as deep and as wide as my four front teeth. My blood rushed, hot and wild. Salt from the sea encumbered the densely humid breeze as it whipped the small island upon which I stood. My hair flapped like a banner on a ship as I waited patiently for my turn. My coven sister before me entered the old moss-peppered stone cottage through a rusted iron door.

The island was only large enough to hold a bonfire surrounded by a hundred people. Only the salt-slapped cottage burdened the spec of land upon which I approached the elder witch. She was tall and slender. Her hair was as gray as the overcast sky, but was emphasized by surviving strands of auburn.

"I wiped the spilt blood off my chin with my fingers and placed them into the elder's mouth. She sucked my fingers clean. Then she nodded at the doorway with blind eyes."

The elder witch, our leader and most knowledgeable among us, halted me at the cottage door. Long and thin black rags wrapped her body, tattered and grimy. The ragged garments covered her almost entirely, revealing only glimpses of pale white skin, including her bare toes. She gripped a knife as rusted as the iron door, which was odd, as she had never brought a knife before. Black cloth wrapped her face, covering all except her milky white eyes that bore no pupils or irises. My face was also veiled in this manner. We all covered our faces when we convened here.

I wiped the spilt blood off my chin with my fingers and placed them into the elder's mouth. She sucked my fingers clean. Then she nodded at the doorway with blind eyes. The air was misty, and the sea breeze gusted relentlessly. A lit torch on either side of the doorway struggled to survive the abusive storm wind, its flames turning blue as the yellow was licked away. The torches illuminated a symbol etched into a stone above the iron doorway. A rune is what the elder called it. It was a different symbol than what was normally there, but that did not surprise me, as this was not a normal gathering. I wiped the unyielding blood-gush from my lip with my fingers once again and smeared it across the rune.

Energy, with a shine like gold, blazed inside the crevasse of the rune, as if the stone harbored lava in its core. Waves crashed audibly along the edges of the island's rocky shores as the wind howled. An almost nervous glance back at the elder was met with a chastising expression.

"Mask your fear with tenacious defiance. Inside. Do not allow yourself to feel that weakness."

I entered the dimly lit cottage and the elder entered behind me. She shut the heavy iron door with only a graze of her gaunt and jaundiced fingertips. The energy inside of the cottage contrasted the weather outside immensely. This is how the elder wanted our internal emotions to be.

I made my way to the center of the dwelling where an old bookcase awaited me. My sisters had already pushed it aside, revealing a passage that headed down a long wooden stairway with utter darkness waiting at the bottom. I descended carefully. The elder slid the bookcase back into place behind us, again with only her fingertips. There was no flamed candle in the room below, as was always the process, but I knew my sisters were down there, waiting.

The air was thick and difficult to fill our lungs with. I found my place in the circle of sisters easily as their outstretched fingers gingerly welcomed mine. I stood in the pitch-black room with arms spread out and my bare feet shoulder-width apart. I felt the elder graze by me and move into the center of the circle.

The soothing sound of a fingernail carving into the dirt floor was the only audible noise. The fingers touching my right hand were sweaty. The fingers on my left were cold and nervous. The elder continued to draw into the dirt as I concentrated on unleashing my calm. I allowed it to roll out onto my fingertips and transfer to the fingers of my sisters.

Their skin slowly matched my energy.

I listened to the elder's soft steps as she left the circle and drew in the dirt behind me. Just as I parted my bloody lips to speak, she touched my shoulder gently and whispered into my ear.

"When the time comes," she explained in her usual gritty and ominous voice, "step backward."

She entered the circle again and before I could question her, she whispered, "Only a couple of steps will suffice. Hard steps."

The elder found the exact center of the circle and mumbled words from a language not of this realm. The mumbling continued for what seemed like half the night. Weakness grew heavy inside me, and my body throbbed with fatigue. My sisters and I fought to keep each other's arms raised. The world spun around me slightly, slowly, in the darkness, as I was unable to use vision as a source of stability. My sisters tugged at me, keeping me upright.

Then a flash of light illuminated the room almost entirely. The elder stood in the center of the room utterly nude.

The light dimmed to a deep red flame. It was no larger than what a single candle's wick could bear, and it floated magically above the elder's palm. In her other hand, she still tightly gripped the rusted knife. The flame flickered weakly, threatening our sight with its imminent departure.

"Prepare yourself for his arrival," she commanded.

The woman on my right let go of my fingers, while the sister on my left hesitated. I met her gaze as she squeezed my left hand as a gesture of assurance, then let go. I peeled the black cloth from my skin, which was still wet with blood. I unwrapped myself until I was standing in the dark room as naked as the day I entered the world. I couldn't help but glance at my sisters' faces for the first time.

Five exposed and vulnerable women surrounded the elder, all with blood spilt all down their chins and chest covering their breasts as if it were a garment. The elder was the only one clean. I ignored an oddly curious realization that every woman here was young, but of different nationality.

"Remember our trials," she said dramatically as she allowed the floating fire to fall from her palm like liquid gold to the ground. The red flames ignited it in a perfect circle. The elder stepped out, just as she always did, although this time we actually got to witness the beauty of her magic.

Then she slammed the rusty knife into her own chest and dropped to her knees. I almost screamed in shock but consumed every fiber of energy I had left in me to restrain myself. A quick inspection of my sisters revealed the same behavior. Mask the weakness.

The elder let out a deep and guttural scream that reverberated throughout the room. It turned to inaudible muttering as she ripped the knife back out.

Her blood sprayed out and flashed against the flames as if it were fermented animal fat. I began to chant the words I had practiced so many times before. My sisters joined me.

“Lok toke natta ua’aka nak otak.”

The circle of fire ignited straight lines across the circle in the shape of an upside-down star. The elder witch released one final moan and collapsed outside the flaming pentagram.

We continued our chant as I watched the elder witch’s blood pool slowly spread towards the blazing ring. Flames ebbed slowly but inevitably and traded its yellow glow for red. Just as they were at their smallest, the blood pool made contact with the top of the pentagram and extinguished that part of the ring.

Darkness spread as the flames died in the manner that they came to life. A terrifying realization paralyzed me as the pentagram extinguished fully. We each stood on a point of the star, but I stood at the bottom. The pentagram faced me.

Then the light deserted us. We ceased chanting. No one moved a muscle. I only listened. Listened to the darkness. No light. No sound. Nothing.

But then, something. Then there was something. Breathing. It was faint and scarcely noticeable. I held my last sacred breath and listened to the darkness carefully. An exhale through large nostrils, like a sleeping horse, commanded the attention of the room. Then a heavy step pressed upon the dirt floor. Sniffing followed. Then my heart raced at the sound of an unmistakable growl.

The growl was gentle but full of an ominous tone, like thunder. Silence resumed. I opened my eyes wider as if it were possible to see anything. The darkness remained pitch black, but movement continued.

The sister farthest from me quickened her breathing as she attempted to calm her fear, but she failed miserably. Moments later, my sister next to me released a subtle and almost inaudible whimper. I pulled on the internal fibers of courage I pretended to possess and fed it to my imaginary fortitude. The effort was accidentally successful. I embraced the serenity and wore it like armor.

The sound of the footsteps on the dirt were more to the liking of hooves as the adversary drew nearer. The approach was slow and steady, like a jungle cat’s prowl.

Hot air suddenly caressed my wet breast, startling me so fiercely I nearly cried. I closed my eyes and stood as still as I possibly could. The steps circled around me. Then he touched me.

Warm snakeskin fingertips grazed the small of my back and dragged up my spine. He circled again, intensely close. His breath was hot and wet and smelled of sulfur. My mind screamed in agony, but I resisted, through sheer strength of will, and remained as still as an immovable object.

His fingers gingerly caressed my belly hole as if seeing it with his skin. His fingertips were soft like the underside of a dog’s paw, and they moved slowly around to my ribs. A second set of fingertips made contact on my right side.

Two full palms touched me now and slid forward towards my breasts. I realized the beast was standing behind me when I felt the moisture of his breath on my ear.

I let out the loudest blood curdling scream I could muster, at risk of fainting, and took two forceful steps backward. I bumped into the beast behind me and caught him entirely off guard, my scream confusing him. He stumbled backward.

Red light illuminated the room in a flash that did not settle. My sisters abandoned their positions and moved closer to each other; terror unveiled upon their faces. They gaped wide-eyed at the nightmare that stood behind me as they huddled near the elder witch's corpse. I exhaled slowly and turned to face my assailant.

A demon more terrifying than ever described by humans, stood paralyzed in the blazing rune drawn into the dirt earlier by the elder. The rune matched the symbol carved into the stone outside of the cottage doorway.

The demon spoke in an unnaturally hoarse voice. "Summon... me... only to... snare... me..."

I signaled my sisters to move, just like we did in our trials. They scurried with what energy remained and surrounded the beast in a tight circle. I walked over to the elder's corpse and retrieved the rusted knife. Then we all chanted the familiar rite.

"Lok toke natta ua'aka nak otak."

The demon pointed a finger at the darkness behind me and uttered the word "Sacrifice..."

"No," I answered. "You are the sacrifice."

I approached the demon with the courage of a goddess and dragged the knife across the side of his throat. The jugular released black blood in excess, like slimy tar.

"You were always the sacrifice."

My sisters continued the chant until the demon's eyes rolled back into its head. The red fire transformed to yellow, and the demon's body collapsed. The light dimmed slowly as we all embraced each other quietly and savored the respite.

Movement behind us disturbed our tranquility. The elder witch struggled to sit up. We hastened to her aid. We surrounded her and helped her get to her feet. She held out her gaunt hand and snapped her fingers. The room illuminated fully, as if we were outside in the sunlight.

"This mortal shell is weak, brittle, fragile," she explained in a voice not her own.

"Elder, you should rest..." I suggested.

"I am not the elder witch. I am the Goddess you have summoned!" She declared as she stretched her new body. "Nevertheless, prepare yourselves, my divine daughters. Together we shall bring to pass mine own will. The will of a Goddess. For the earth is a woman, a mother, and shall no longer be ruled by men."



-Street-
William Bartlett



William Bartlett identifies as a dark poet, epic fantasy author, gothic short story writer, Assistant Editor at Quill & Crow Publishing House, and a dragon currently in its human form. Oh yea, and also as a big ol' lump of love.

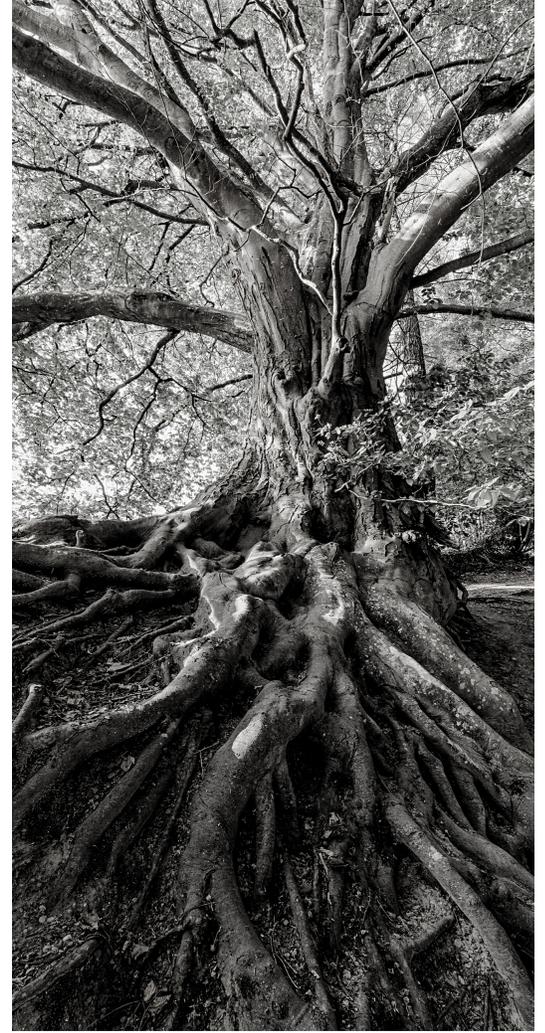
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Corse Rapture or Ruin



Written by Mary Rajotte

My body is a prison bound to the earth by tangled roots and a curse whispered with ill intent. Banished from my covenstead by my sisters and left to rot, I endure this offensive confinement, persevering by the sheer will of my determination to escape.

For decades, I have lived in this grove, fused within this forsaken elm. Deep fissures gather dust across my limbs. Pungent mushrooms putrefy into blackened welts at my tangled roots. Belladonna and hemlock, with their sweet, noxious breath, taint the soil. I am a monstrosity accused of betrayal by my coven, abandoned to this hellish circumstance.

Alongside me, one of my sisters sways her groaning arms to keep from seizing. Another has rotted to her core and collapsed in on herself. Moldered by time, her insides teem with fleas and squirming larvae.

"Deep fissures gather dust across my limbs. Pungent mushrooms putrefy into blackened welts at my tangled roots. Moldered by time, her insides teem with fleas and squirming larvae."

Come Rapture or Ruin

Mary Rajotte

Countless seasons have approached and passed, lashing us with biting wind, with stinging rain and blistering sun. As autumn approaches once more, and the earth cools, I refuse to allow myself the same fate.

I conjure a summons and release it through these gaunt branches. For untold years, I repeat my call until at last, a male figure appears at the edge of this time-forgotten grove and paces up the well-worn path, his will mine for the taking.

He tilts his head, his eyes widening, his lips parting, curiosity drawing his gaze up my arched trunk where my languid boughs arc overhead. I bend to reach him, trailing my branches across his back to coax him close. He hesitates, his brow furrowing, his hand wavering, until he places it flat against me. The thrum of his pulse is, at first, nothing more than a low rhythm. The longer his hand rests there, the more my spirit aches for atonement. For it will take more than a lustful glance or a delicate touch to free me.

I send a biting breeze from my crown to my roots. Drawing back with a shiver, the young man winces, having caught the tender flesh of his palm on my rough bark. He cups his hands together but his blood has already left its stain on me, one I imbibe with greed, one that enlivens me, if only long enough to let out a deep-rooted groan that sends my limbs creaking.

"My grandmother spoke of you. Of this place," he says, edging close once more. "She forbade me to come here. But in dreams, I've heard your whispers, as though you were calling to me alone."

His voice stirs a memory of an evening much like this one. The moon was a flower abloom in the sky. In procession, we set out with incense and candles in commemoration of our most revered sisters, the same way we did every year on this night. Before I knew of this place, I envied those honored with an interment in the sacred elms at the boundary of our covenstead. Wise and strong, they stood guard there, as they do now, burgeoning with life even in death.

But a withering wind comes, and with it, a violent memory lashes my thoughts. Of being dragged to this woodland, one tainted with noxious plants so nothing else can grow. Forced into a pit where my sisters buried me knee-deep in thick muck and set slithering roots charmed by their dark magick to confine me. In punishment, they severed my arm, binding me to this blighted tree, forcing me to a fate worse than death, where scaled bark crept up my body, smothering me until I became what I am.

I strike the young man with my branches, scratching at his exposed skin, hoping to chase him away, for trusting the wrong person got me banished to begin with. But when he recoils, I worry I've cast aside the only one who has heard me. The only soul to show me any mercy in this place where the days and nights intertwine into one another.

I was a young woman so full of life, so endowed with magic, only to be fated to this grave before my time. The only allegiance I held was to my sisters, who broke our covenant the moment they exiled me in this damnable place. Come rapture or ruin, I will set us free, the forgotten ones in this tainted grove, we wicked few.

Come Rapture or Ruin

Mary Rajotte

I start with a whisper, one so hushed the young man won't realize the intention that brought him here isn't his own. His expression blanks. He falls to his knees, clawing at a patch of foul plants underfoot along the edge of the path. Bringing the poisoned greenery to me by the blistering handful, he places them at my base in an offering of devotion. Overhead, storm clouds converge, rumbling with thunder until the skies unleash centuries of pent-up turmoil. Rainfall washes the stinging plant nectar into the mud, an elixir I devour. Their power surges through my veins until it reaches the very tips of my branch-fingers.

Still spellbound and unable to resist my dark rebirth, with harried breath, the young man moves closer and dusts the spoil from my roots. Scrapes mosses and lichens from my body. Shoos aside insects and sloughs away filamentous cobwebs. Through my branches, I unleash a howling wind, a lament to centuries lost. To things dead and dying. To the night moths and lantern bugs that have become my sunset, my evening sky. With twists and turns, I sway with a liveliness I've longed for. But my joy is short-lived, for just outside the circle of darkness, vicious voices approach.

Villagers edge toward me the way they have in years past, but this time, they come with more than their lanterns and hollow prayers. Carrying pointed tools, they march into the grove, the air souring at their biting tone, evidence they still view me as some evil wretch, some tainted thing they wish to persecute, to defile, to confine.

The ringleader edges through the crowd. "We see your weakness, Nicholas. How the season darkens and with it your resolve. Even now, you are too weak to resist her hex."

"Your fear of things you don't understand is hateful!" Nicholas shouts, stepping between us. "Binding these women to this forsaken place, Father? It's barbaric!"

"The only insidiousness is how you do her bidding. Bend to her will!"

"Your malice threatens us, not the souls immured here."

The man tenses, clutching something close to his chest. "It may be too late to protect you, son. God willing, this penance will save the rest of us."

The group surges, driving Nicholas aside, allowing his father to rush past.

"For decades, we have kept this vile hag and those like her from tempting us," he shouts, raising a clay jar over his head like a prize. "If our prayers are not enough, I shall prevent our village from being bewitched the way you have."

The young man's father scoops out a handful of the jar's foul-smelling concoction and, lunging for my sister beside me, douses her roots. She lets out an unholy wail, bending at the waist to brush it away, but her parched limbs snap off and crash to the dirt. He moves to the other, smearing the thick grease across her body, where the teeming beetles and grubs inside her blister and pop, turning her corewood to mush.

When the others approach me, armed with their weapons, their eyes dark with evil intent, Nicholas lunges for them, snatching an axe. When I cry out, he freezes long enough for me to utter an enchantment. Raising the weapon, he twists, but instead of confronting the mob, he obeys my invocation and turns his attack on me.

Come Rapture or Ruin

Mary Rajotte

The first blow is an explosion of searing pain, the shink of the blade prickling my eardrums. The next plunges the scene into excruciating blackness. Each impact sends sparks flickering behind my eyelids, agony jolting through my core. My wounds ooze sap, a sweet, woody perfume that sickens me.

When I come to, the attackers have taken my snapped branches, my shorn bark, and set them alight. Beside me, my sisters smolder, two piles of acrid cinders fouling the air. On his knees before me with his upturned hands trembling, Nicholas sobs.

Leaning forward, I stroke his head, cradling his face.

“Finish this act,” I say, my throat as dry as sawdust. “This atrocity should not go unpunished. Set me free.”

His eyes wide, his mouth falling open, he fights to his feet. Before the others can stop him, he takes up the axe and again serves my command. Every blade strike exorcises my rage. Each time he rends away another piece of my rotting husk, he frees more of me, exposing my arms, unbinding my legs. Pain seethes through me, but this suffering I’ll endure if it grants me the freedom I’ve been denied for so long.

With my entire body seized in anguish, he takes one last swing. I fall forward, collapsing on my face in the cool damp earth. My hips and shoulders jut sharp and angular from my new form. The sweet stench of death is an aura that clings to me with teeth and talons. Yet I am enlivened by this rebirth, this bitter unleashing.

Summoning my energy, I push myself onto my elbows, peering into the shadowed copse. Gaping, the villagers snatch up their tools. They edge closer, leering at the languid curve of my spine. Sneering at the arch of my back, at the shapeliness of my arms and legs. They slink toward me, salivating at the womanliness of my breasts.

Stepping before me, Nicholas holds his hands out to shield me, but the hungry mob drives forward. Outnumbered, they force him aside, and in my haste to retreat, I careen backward. There, his father pounces, dousing me with his poison. When he sets me ablaze, flames lick at my rawness. I wail to the night, rending brittle leaves and smothering any hint of starlight left in the heavens with my very voice. My torment scorches the surrounding earth, setting the villagers alight. Shrieking, some fall to the dirt to douse the fire. Others, terror-stricken, scatter from the grove.

The need to pursue them surges through me, but I wilt and stagger sideways. Overhead, ashes flutter, coming to rest on my shoulders. Only then do I see they are not the detritus of my ruined sisters but moths, their sheer wings tarnished and tattered, disintegrating at my touch, seeping like gold foil into the furrows of my skin.

In the nothingness of forest-shadow, a dim glow gasps to life. In a dance of flare and flashes, lantern bugs pulse toward me, hovering before they fall into the dirt, a bejeweled carpet inviting me to rest. Collapsing onto my back, I shovel handfuls of earth over me, cooling my body with their magical leavings. It permeates my blackened parts, feeding my spirit, enlivening what remains, what the hateful mob tried to raze from existence.

Come Rapture or Ruin

Mary Rajotte

When I feel enough of myself returned, I claw free and emerge from this premature grave. Any villagers who remain clamber to their feet and screaming, they tear away. Behind them, I follow, each footstep bringing about the thing they fear the most. That thing they whisper about in those darkened hours. A jezebel. An aberration to be put down and punished in consequence of their lustful wanting.

I may be what they made me, a wicked thing of rapturous decay. But I am also a force of my diabolic creation, and I shall return my vengeance tenfold to those who sought to rid me from this wretched earth, those who cursed me to this place.



-Street-
Mary Rajotte



Canadian author Mary Rajotte has a penchant for penning nightmarish tales of folk horror and paranormal suspense. Her work has been published in a number of anthologies and she is currently querying her first novel. Sometimes camera-elusive but always coffee-fueled, you can find Mary at her website

<http://www.maryrajotte.com> or support her Patreon for exclusive fiction at patreon.com/maryrajotte

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A Lesson on Modern Witchcraft

Written by Melanie Whitlock

Magic

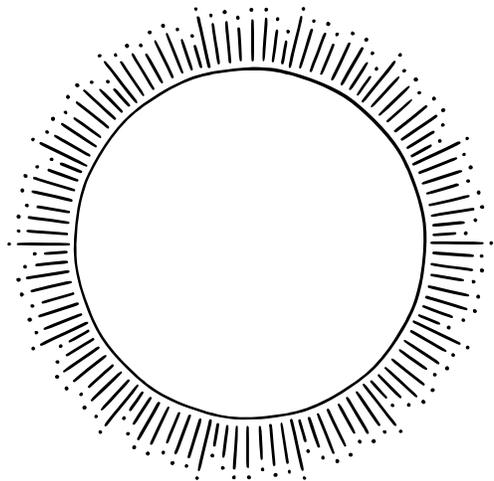
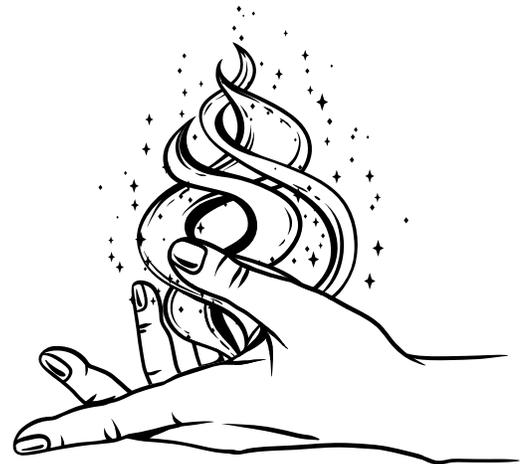
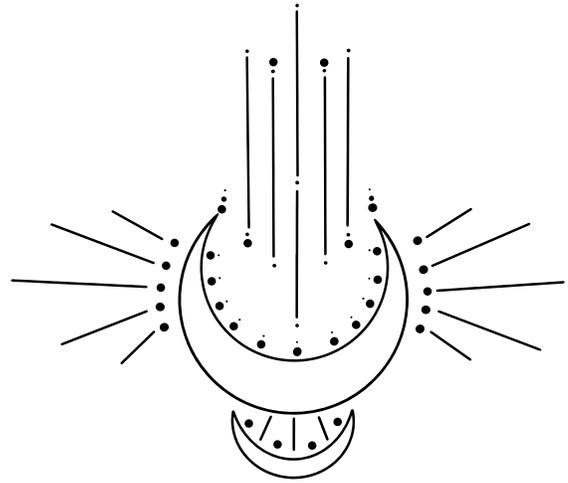
Many witches believe in magic, a manipulative force exercised through the practice of the craft. Throughout history magic has been viewed as a law of nature, disregarded by science. Those who practice have individual beliefs and experience with magic, some people refer to it as supernatural and some the manipulation of cosmic energy. Perhaps... some things don't always have to be so easily explained.

Five elements

Many traditions hold beliefs in the five classic elements or representations of matter. These five elements are invoked during magical rituals, notably when consecrating a magic circle or protection circle. The five elements are as follows: Earth, Air, Spirit, Water and Fire. Each element is usually associated with a cardinal point of the compass or the five points of a pentagram, the most prominently associated symbol of witchcraft.

Deities

Witchcraft is not a religion but a practice. Wicca is usually Duotheistic, meaning one works with, or worships a goddess. The traditional goddess is the Triple Goddess, who is followed by most in wicca practices. However, witches may work with or worship the gods or goddess who they identify with most or who call upon them spiritually. These deities can be taken from numerous religions, therefore resulting in the craft spreading through Norse, pagan, Greek, and Christian faiths.



A Lesson on Modern Witchcraft

Written by Melanie Whitlock

Ritual Practices

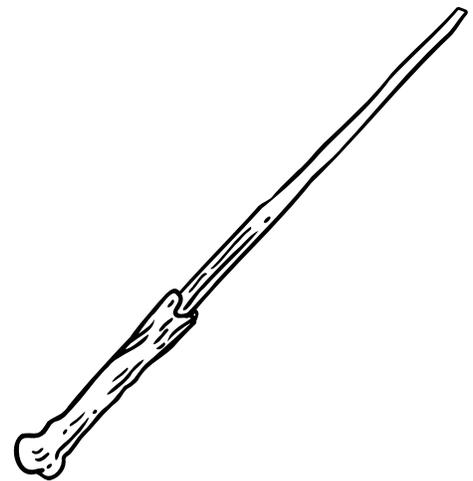
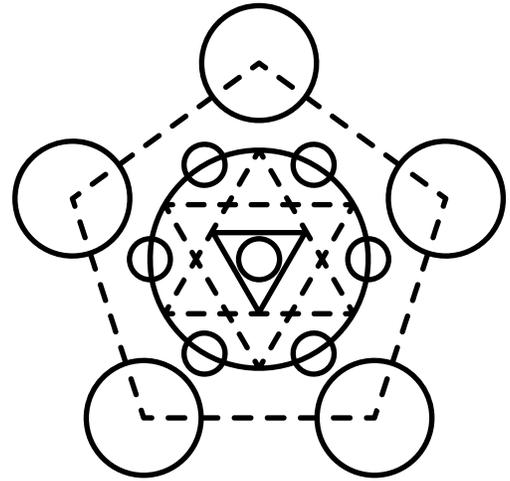
Many rituals within witchcraft are used when celebrating the sabbats, worshipping the deities or working with magic. Often these take place on a full moon or following the lunar cycle. Rituals take place within a purified magic circle and invoke the elements or guardians of respective elements. Once the circle is cast, magic or various forms of 'raising energy' can be used for healing or to send energies to those outside the sacred space.

Tools

When conducting the invocations or rites of magic, witches often use tools individual to their own style of the craft. This can be accompanied by working in the naked form; however, this is a patriarchal view sensationalized by the media. This isn't to say you can't dance with the devil under the pale moonlight, but it's not a necessity. Tools of witchcraft may include: a knife called an athame, a wand, a pentacle, broomstick, cauldron, candles, incense, tarot and a chalice.

Book of Shadows

Due to witchcraft being a practice and not a faith, there is no sacred text or scripture like the Christian bible. However, just like with deities, witches can take practices or meanings from various faiths and apply them to their work. A book of shadows is a collection of such things along with rites of passage, affirmations and invocations that are personal to the witch's own practices. The book of shadows can also be known as the grimoire.

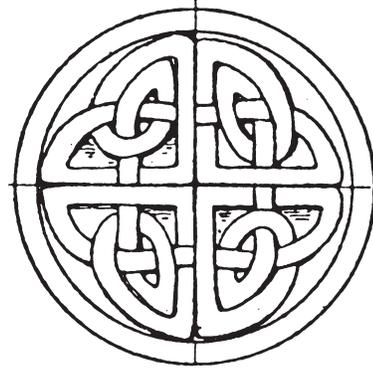


A Lesson on Modern Witchcraft

Written by Melanie Whitlock

Wheel of the Year

Wiccans or witches celebrate several seasonal festivals, commonly known as sabbats. The names of these sabbats are derived from Celtic lore and Welsh deities such as Mabon. The sabbats are Samhain, Yule, Imbolic, Ostara, Beltane, Litha, Lughnasadh, and Mabon. These are separated into greater and lesser sabbats.



It's All Just... Magic

Witchcraft... what is it? I hear you ask. A practice, an infamous time for religions and history, a movement empowering women... you could categorise it by many things. But it's a personal practice. Sure, it has common themes used by everyone who takes part in the practice, but it is as individual as the soul who casts it. So I thought I would explain what witchcraft and magic is to me...

If you asked me to pinpoint the moment I first started believing in magic, I could tell you straight away. Six years old, sitting upon the bench in my grandfather's overgrown garden of lupins and bluebells, I listened to him tell the stories that would shape my future. The beginning of the mystical path.

With knotted hair and grass stained knees I would listen and watch, enraptured as he spoke of the fairy king of Harknott Pass and the twelve dancing princesses, who would dance around stones ushering in the changing of the seasons and each moon phase. We would often spend weekends like this, playing with dazzling gemstones and weaving dream catchers out of twigs and worn leather. The animation and passion in his eyes as he spoke of each folklore tale while we worked had me bouncing with excitement. Craving to know more about these princesses that could channel the nature of our world; its beauty, grace, elements and nurture it into something new and wonderful for all to benefit.

A Lesson on Modern Witchcraft

Written by Melanie Whitlock

The magical connection was instantaneous. My grandfather spoke with such conviction I was sure he was speaking from memory rather than from the pages of a book. Truth rather than story. Fact rather than fiction. How could such wonders not truly exist? How had these tales survived if they were not born from an element of truth?

There was only one explanation surely...

Magic!

As I grew older, I dedicated a large portion of my twenty-seven years to studying this further. Academically, through historical and mythological studies. As well as delving into my own family history of Romanian Fairfolk and soothsayers. Reading thousands of books from different religious and cultural beliefs, to works of fiction in various languages. Including Latin! (which is as painstaking to learn, as they say). With each new found discovery and understanding, however, I was sad to say the magic in me started to die.

Twelve dancing princesses became Long Meg and her daughters. The fairy king of Harknott Pass became a rocky ravine that was just too dangerous to navigate even for the experienced hiker. The Romanian mystics that made up my family tree became women of sordid fair folk tales and ridicule. Waifs and strays that good people of a better class and religious understanding never mixed with and if they did it was only for entertainment and at the physical expense of the woman.

Crying, I explained this all to my grandfather. Desperately questioning why, he would lie to me and tell me such tales in the first place for them to be nothing more than... well, tales. Asked him why he would think of telling a child stories of witchcraft when it all was surrounded by was grief and fear. I remember him smiling, shuffling his beautifully painted tarot deck as the tears rolled down my cheeks "Magic is what we make it, flower."

You see, my grandfather was a man of great importance. A garrison sergeant major of the British army. Supposedly by title, one of the men of status that my studies had left me so upset about. Yet he was also one of the most magical men I knew. Our family magic was as he had always described as 'Soul Magik'.

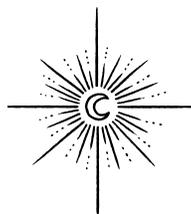
A Lesson on Modern Witchcraft

Written by Melanie Whitlock

Our connections to souls and their understanding is deeper than most he would say. But how could he believe such things when he was such a stand-up representation of the very culture that dismissed magic and burnt it at the stake?! “Because magic is what you make it” he explained again. Grandfather went on to say how he used his magic to protect people, from our country to the young who joined the ranks in his mess hall. The men and women from broken homes and the injured on the battlefield. It was his magic, and it was his job to protect people with it. He had inadvertently done it all his life, but realised it was his calling the moment he stood in uniform. Shuffling his Saint Michael deck into his pocket, as said angel watched over him and guided him on the battlefield.

His other magic was love. I don’t think I need to explain that though... maybe another time. When I discuss soulmates etc... Grandad and Grandma’s tale is quite the one to tell after all.

Since then, years have passed along and sadly so has my wonderful, enchanting grandfather. But the magic in me has continued to burn and rise into my very own craft. I no longer fear the term ‘witchcraft’ and all it may mean for me to embrace my history and be different. I care not about society or what it wishes to name me for being different and uncontainable; nor shall I forget how history has been ruthless to my sisters and brothers who understood nature on a different physical and spiritual plane than others. Instead I channel my magic into helping others, restoring broken houses of the past and history. Writing out new takes on the old folklore tales so that the magic can continue to be passed on to our future generations. As I write this I look over at the picture of my grandfather, his tarot deck on my bookcase and smile. “Magic is what we make it” I can hear him whisper around my heart. Well I promise Grandad, I’ll make our magic last forever.



ACROW'S
POEM

EVERY

I touch every line you carved inside my brain
Capture every murmur you left upon my tongue
Subsume every ache you needled within my gut

Each a poison

Hatred in every nerve my skull can hold
Vileness in every word passed through my lips
Loathing filling me from bottom to top

Castles in the woods

Castles in the clouds

Castles that never stuck around

Every promise a derision

Every step a lie

Every glance a prison

I believed everything

What a fool am I

WRITTEN BY ERIN QUILL



Poet Spotlight



ERIN QUILL

Questions by Marie Casey

1. If you were forced to choose between blood or ink, what would you choose and why?

I would for sure pick ink because then I can write to my heart's content even if my computer breaks down. Also I can always take someone else's blood. I assume I don't need to give up any of mine.

2. Does poetry come to you in an assaulting manner or are you a normal person?

I am not normal. My poetry comes as revenge, rage, and massive amounts of disgust. The lovely voices in my head definitely help.

3. What is it about a poem that makes you want to caw caw caw?

I caw caw caw because it's a fun noise and I like to write about it. Also now I have a caw family all to myself. It's MINE. I'm not sharing.

Follow and Support

-Erin Quill-

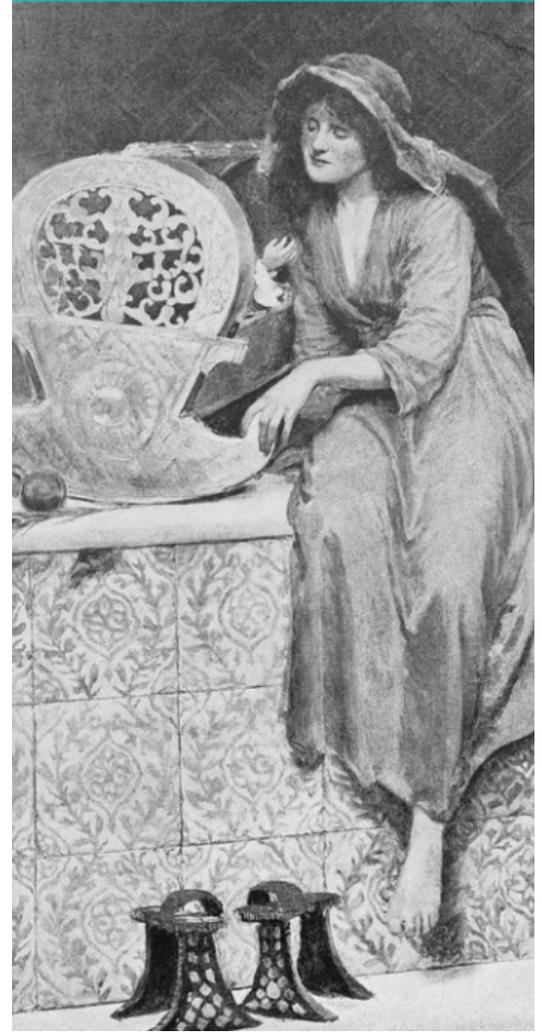
Picture book writer attempting to learn Adobe Illustrator, cat wrangler, Dark Poet, and audiobook enthusiast. Hopes to one day spend more time around sloth bears and large, wild cats.

Twitter: @erinquill8

TikTok: @erinquill8

<https://www.quillcorner.com>

The Goblin and the Midwife



Written by Brad Acevedo

From my position on the eave of the cottage, I can hear the witch-tales told within. I bide my time, avoiding the sting of wrought iron bars on the window as I gaze within to the warm hearth.

I have been observing this small family ever since they set roots here some six harvests ago. They encroached on our meadow without so much as a greeting or a saucer of cream left upon an inviting doorstep. They did us a disservice and thus, I am tasked with retrieving the Child for our own. A parcel of land for the soul of a boy seems a fair trade to me.

I planned my visits carefully. I found myself emboldened as the Man left one day, a musket slung over his brawny back. I continued to observe from the treeline at the edge of the meadow as the day turned to night and back many times over. I watched as the Woman emerged from the home each night, wringing her hands in worry and clutching her belly.

"I feel the faintest twinge of sunlight's poisonous grasp upon my mottled skin and know that my night has ended. As I slink back to the ring of mushrooms that leads into our realm, I begin to plot."

The Goblin and the Midwife

Brad Stuedo

I watched the Woman lose hope and finally stop emerging each night. She still left a lantern out in the hopes that he would return, but it was not to be. I watched as the Boy grew and my opportunity slipped further and further away, safe within the iron, just beyond my grasp. I watched as the Woman's midsection grew larger with the Boy's sibling and *that* was when I knew I had my best opportunity.

I am still here on the rooftop. The family below has been asleep for some while. I feel the faintest twinge of sunlight's poisonous grasp upon my mottled skin and know that my night has ended. As I slink back to the ring of mushrooms that leads into our realm, I begin to plot. I arrive at a plan which I shall enact the next evening.

Another woman has been visiting the one who carries a child. I've seen her the past few days and she has returned tonight. I need to be careful. Earlier this day, I approached the Boy as he played in the meadow. Conjuraton is one of my many talents and so I set upon approaching from the forest in the guise of another young boy equal to his age. I approached the Boy with a friendly grin and sat down before him, inviting him to chat.

The Boy's name was Thomas, likely named after his father. I told him my name and asked him about his home life. Through my delightful deceit I gleaned that he did indeed live alone with his mother. They had been exiled from the closest village due to an act by his absent Father, driving the village elders to declare his entire family heathens. In defiance, the Father's Sister, the Midwife, would brave the night to visit the Mother and assist her as she was, in fact, ripe with child.

The Midwife cooked and cared for the Boy. She was the one that told stories to the Mother, and who also installed the wrought iron bars. Thomas told me she had sensed something dark and malevolent (*stop, you flatter me!*) on the edge of the woods and caution would have to be had. The Midwife was no stranger to living her life in the shadows. Woe be to her if the village caught wind of her own conjurations in the night, dabbling and communing with the other worlds beyond the veil. She learned things and acquired The Sight which few Humans could use to glimpse into our world.

There was a Magick Woman at hand, it seemed. I would have to be truly careful and bide my time.

Then came the fun part. I told Thomas that he was my friend, but nobody else wanted him around. Why else would his Father have ventured into the woods and never returned? Why else would his parents bring about another child unless they intended to replace the one they had? Why else would none of the village children venture across the meadow to play with him? He told me I was wrong, of course, but I assured him that I heard things whispered in accusatory tones amidst the clergy of their former home.

I told him there was another place nearby I could take him. It was a wonderful place full of fun games to play. Caves to explore for buried treasure, glowing mountains to climb to seek adventure. There were bounties of delightful pastries so his family would never go hungry.

The Goblin and the Midwife

Brad Stuedo

He expressed curiosity, and I told him I would show him, but he needs to pay the toll. *See, this place, this World of Wonders, could be his and his Mother's, all for the cost of a single tooth. After all, he was surely about to lose one of his own. Wasn't it hanging on by the most meager of threads?*

Why a tooth?

Such an inquisitive child.

Well, in this other world, teeth are coveted because they are so pearly white and pretty to look at.

Perhaps I took it a little too far. The Boy grew wary and apprehensive. He abruptly told me he needed to return home. I bid him farewell and watched as he left, no doubt to tell the two women about his new friend and the funny things he said. Perhaps I had been too eager. The Midwife would know what the child spoke of. I had sown my seeds, but perhaps I had complicated matters further. I would have to act swiftly. My people were demanding payment. And I didn't want to incur their wrath...

I spent the rest of the night observing the family go about their evening. I peeked through the windows as sneakily as I dare, being careful not to touch the accursed iron. The cottage was warm, despite the heartbreak that had befallen the family. It had one room with the décor of a few chairs, a rough hewn bed, and a flight of bisected log stairs leading to a small loft where the Boy slept. The scene inside was delightful and I felt a faint, uncomfortable twinge of empathy tugging at the base of my pock-marked skull. I scratched at it absentmindedly with a jagged talon, the loose and hairless flesh catching on one of my three sallow fingers. I pulled away with a grimace, and wiped the small swell of golden ichor oozing forth from my wound.

Inside, the Midwife cooked a delicious smelling stew in a large cast iron pot. I could smell the stink of white magick upon her. What useless wards was she conjuring within the cauldron? Young Thomas was clutching a small toy dog, woven from grey cloth, undoubtedly with a protection totem woven deftly inside. The Midwife was clever.

I watched as the Mother suddenly let out a cry and clutched her swollen belly. The Midwife rushed over and I knew that my time was approaching. In my excitement, I brushed against the iron and fell back with a pained screech. I slunk back, defeated, to the mushroom ring, burning with the singe of an arcane flame and the fire of vengeance gnawing at the marrow of my soul. Soon, my friends.

Tonight is the night. It is time. A cry from inside the cottage. The hour is upon us. New life, a new Human soul to stain this already begotten world.

The Midwife had been chopping firewood and rushed inside to aid the Woman, leaving the front door open just a crack in her haste. Just enough. The two women were at the bed, one moaning in discomfort and the other tending to her frantically. The Boy had been set to bed already but he peeked over the edge of the loft at the scene unfolding below. I ignored it all and weaved into the shadows, sliding deftly around the door.

I scuttled up the stairs as I approached the bed. He saw me coming and ducked under his covers.

Such a sweet child. His soul would taste so sweet.

I scurried to the foot of his bed and crept under the cover, relishing in my slow approach. I felt the weight and warmth of his body below me and heard his whimpers. And then: a shadow in the darkness. Fangs flashed, silent, but rending. I was unprepared and took a blow to the haunch. But this was not my first battle with a Guardian and would likely not be my last. I recoiled momentarily and pulled down a swath of blanket upon the tiny gray form. It was the toy dog, but I knew this was but a small and fierce Golem sent to protect the boy. The Guardian was caught off guard by the entanglement of material and I took advantage to maneuver onto its cloth back, plunge my talons into its soft throat, and wrench the head back.

The Boy squealed as stuffing and witch-moss flew forth. I dug deeply into the Guardian's neck and found a small bead, the size of a walnut. I could feel the carvings on it and recognized the magick imbued within. I crushed it deftly and all fell silent as the small toy dog became inanimate once more. No more tricks.

I crept upon the Boy and pressed my forehead against his. He was sobbing and I, the merciful individual I am, decided to comfort him. I told him to give me a tooth and I'd go on my way. I used my boy-guise voice and he recognized it instantly. The Boy shook his head and pressed a chubby fist to his mouth. I wasn't asking.

I'll spare you the details. Know that the tooth story is pure fallacy. I did reach into his mouth but it was to begin the process of imparting my entire essence into the Child, to absorb what might have been him and replace it with what was unmistakably Fae, one of Those That Dwell Below. His cries were indistinguishable from the newborn's in the room beneath. It was over swiftly, and the soul of the Boy would soon emerge from limbo and enter the Fae world, while I remained behind within this husk. Here, I will dwell and destroy the rest of these interlopers from the inside out. They did seem like a sweet family, but the laws of the old world must be obeyed. If you should happen to encroach and not pay due respects, you must be prepared to pay the price.

I flexed my new fingers, and ran them through the fine blond hair coursing over my smooth head. With the slightest hesitation, I reached out and grasped the iron bars. The metal felt smooth and cold. Cold iron, such an unbelievable sensation. No burning, no pain. I nearly wept at the revelation. I crawled to the edge of the bed, brushing aside the destroyed Guardian and peeked over the edge of the loft. My new Mother and Nanny looked back up, smiling warmly. Mother held my new baby sibling in her arms, swaddled gently. My Magick Nanny stared back at me and, for the faintest of moments, her smile flickered into a creased line of concern. I smiled back, beamed as joyfully as you would please. She frowned again and turned back to the new child. I will have to deal with her eventually. But for now, I am tired. It had been an exhausting day and I had earned my rest.

The Goblin and the Midwife

Brad Stuedo

This is how I began my new life within the Child-skin. Next I would slowly drive my new Mother insane until she begged for death. I would upend the Magick Woman's accursed cauldron and slay her where she stood. In time, yes. In time.

I approach my new baby Sister, one blissful and ignorant of the ways of the world. I lean in closer and feel the Baby's breath exhaling softly. I breathe it deep and sample the tiniest morsel of its essence. The child stirs in discomfort and I restrain myself from inhaling the rest of it.

Soon we will have our land back. But for now, I have warmth, comfort, and family. One that I will break down to the loosest strands of sanity, and slice the taut cord until all that remains is a gibbering mess. I am happy and satisfied, and have done my people proud.

I am a miracle, not unlike those spells cast by the Magick Woman. But, see, the difference between myself and her... I have all the time in the world.



-Street-
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The Witches' Prophecy



Written by K.R. Wieland

At the far end of town was a schoolhouse, and just past the schoolyard, stood a cemetery. There was no need to warn the children to keep away from the graveyard, for they all knew the tales of people who went missing there, especially those who entered with mischievous intent. While most children gave it a wide berth, there was one who did not. Elizabeth Ann always sat just yards away, as close as the teacher would permit her, staring at the stones and mausoleums. There was a determination in her eyes that made the other children uncomfortable. She was nearly eight years old, but had more purpose in her steps than most ladies of twenty-eight.

She saw some boys playing marbles one afternoon as she left the convenience store. Unfortunately for her, they noticed her as well.

Crazy. Haunt. Witch! they taunted. A sharp pain spread throughout the small

"I could've sworn she saw me, saw through my spell. Her eyes turned white and there was death there. What if we got the wrong one?"

of her back and when she turned to look, a marble lay on the ground near her. The boys were each holding slingshots, one empty and the boy holding it smiling.

"I got her!" he cried.

The other two boys pulled back their slings to fire their own marbles, and she ran. They chased her through the fields with pockets full of marbles, shooting at her while they ran. Occasionally, she would get hit and stumble.

Elizabeth Ann didn't hesitate as she approached the cemetery. She ran through the gates knowing it was the one place the boys wouldn't follow.

"We'll get you next time, witch!" She heard them call, but she didn't slow her pace.

She ran until she reached her sister's tombstone and collapsed in front of it. Her chest heaved from exertion, and she gasped for air as tears spilled over her cheeks. She placed a hand on the tombstone, and traced her sister's name with her fingers. Sarah Jane.

The local authorities only searched a few days for her sister when she disappeared two years ago. They concluded that Sarah Jane had either run away or was dead. Perhaps both. Their parents refused to believe their daughter would run away, but eventually gave in to the idea she was dead. They purchased a tombstone despite not having a body to bury.

No one thought to ask Elizabeth Ann her opinion. They instead sought to shelter her from it, since she was only five at the time. But she knew. She felt it the moment her sister died, like a ripple through her body.

Elizabeth Ann dug her hand into the soil, while the other rested on the tombstone. She never saw her parents come here and grieve, but she came enough for all of them. Once all her tears were spent and she was sure the boys were gone, Elizabeth Ann stood, patted the tombstone, and headed home.

She found her mother sitting in her rocker looking frail and gaunt. She hadn't been the same since Sarah Jane died, and most days she just sat there, a ghost of her former self, refusing to eat or move. Two years ago, she would have scolded Elizabeth Ann for the dirt on her petticoat, but now she didn't even spare her a glance. There was emptiness in her mother's eyes.

Her father set down a plate of food at the table for her and himself, fumbling as he did so. He gave her a weak smile. He, at least, still tried, but the pain of losing his eldest was still evident on his face. His hand trembled as he lifted the spoon to his mouth, but he tried to conceal it along with his bloodshot eyes.

Elizabeth Ann admired the photo of Sarah Jane on the mantle. She was lovely. They had been close despite there being ten years between them. Sarah Jane would always take her places and play games with her. The photo on the mantle was taken on Sarah Jane's birthday, and Elizabeth Ann couldn't help but think how she was frozen forever at fifteen.

She helped her father wash the dishes after dinner. When she turned for her room, she met the eyes of a woman standing outside the window. She held the woman's gaze for a moment, then blinked, releasing her and watching as she stumbled back into a tree.

The Witches' Prophecy

K.K. Wieland

Elizabeth Ann slowly made her way outside and walked through the woods. She found them gathered between trees that stood like sentinels, and watched the same woman throw herself at another's feet. Elizabeth Ann crept closer, listening.

"I beg your forgiveness, Witch Mother." The woman bowed low, touching her forehead to the dirt-covered flagstones which were laid with care encircling the dais. "We must look again at the prophecy. The girl--there is something about her."

"What do you mean there is something about her? What are you blabbering on about?" the Witch Mother asked.

"The girl, Sarah Jane's younger sister, had death in her eyes! I've seen it."

"Tell me." The Witch Mother leaned forward in her seat, listening as the other witch told her of the girl in the cemetery, then of following her home.

"I could've sworn she saw me, saw through my spell. Her eyes turned white and there was death there. What if we got the wrong one?"

"Nonsense. The elder girl was a necromancer, we made sure of that." But there was apparent doubt in the Witch Mother's gaze as she leaned back in her throne. "Genevieve, bring me the prophecy. Let us have another look."

Elizabeth Ann kept to the shadows, following the concerned witch as she walked through the woods, stopping in front of the fire pit. Just to the left of it rested a cairn topped with a skull. The witch stared into the empty eye sockets. The girl observed her briefly before making her way home.

That night, she did not sleep. She stared at the ceiling and thought of the witch outside the window. Tonight was not the first time a witch stood watch. She first discovered them in the months leading up to her sister's death. They were there also in the following weeks after. No one else seemed to notice them, but Elizabeth Ann always did. She could sense them, just as she did today in the graveyard. She found that as a child, she was more easily written off, ignored even, perceived as playing when in reality she heard and remembered everything.

This time there was fear in the witch's eyes.

Elizabeth Ann smiled.



The graveyard was serene, aside from the breeze that wound its way through the stones, as if laying a gentle kiss on each.

Elizabeth Ann quietly made her way to the large mausoleum in the center. She tip-toed down into the crypt. After having taught herself to pick the lock last year, it had become her place of solace.

She carefully pulled out the box she kept stored in the depths of the earth. Removing the parchment from within, she read it as she did every night since its discovery. She had found it after following a witch in the days after her sister's death. As she read, she remembered how they celebrated, how they read the prophecy and rejoiced that its foreboding prediction was

no more. Elizabeth Ann had snatched the parchment once the revelry settled, returning to look for spell books that would help her exact her revenge.

Now, she carried it up the steps and brought it to her sister's grave marker. There was only one thing left to do. She grabbed a fistful of soil, and lifted the grave dirt high above her head. Then she began to chant.



The ground shook and rumbled. The witches searched frantically for the cause of the disturbance, first to the ground beneath them, then to the skies, and finally they looked to their Witch Mother for guidance.

Fear shone in her eyes, for she knew the cause.

"Bring me the prophecy!" Her voice screeched in a way the others hadn't heard before.

"Forgive me, Witch Mother," one of them said, "but I went looking for it earlier when you asked and have been searching all night. The prophecy is missing."

The Witch Mother stood, stepped down from her dais, and looked to the horizon between the trees of the dense forest.

"They are coming."



With disjointed steps and dragging limbs, the dead army marched to the call of the little girl. She stopped before the Witch Mother who cowered in fear at the sight of the undead. The girl spoke not a word, but raised her hand and pointed. Skeletons and corpses in all manners of decay answered the silent command.

The Witch Mother's cry ended in a gurgle. The undead army turned back to the girl. At the wave of her fingers, they left to search the forest. The girl watched silently as the remaining witches stared in horror and disbelief, crying out as their questions went unanswered.

A corpse approached. Her skin and tattered clothing hung loose from her bones and her hair was thin and limp. The bones of her leg were smashed, but still she dragged it along, shuffling closer. Elizabeth Ann could read the story of her pain and blinked slowly, understanding the woman had found rest at last in her death, though she deserved better in life.

The decaying woman held out a skull. Elizabeth Ann gently laid her hand on the corpse's hand before taking it.

Memories swam through her, telling the story of her sister's death. She cradled the skull in her arm, the last remnant of her beloved sister, and ascended the dais, sitting on the Witch Mother's throne. Then, she silently waved away the dead, watching as they returned to their peaceful place below the soil.

The Witches' Prophecy

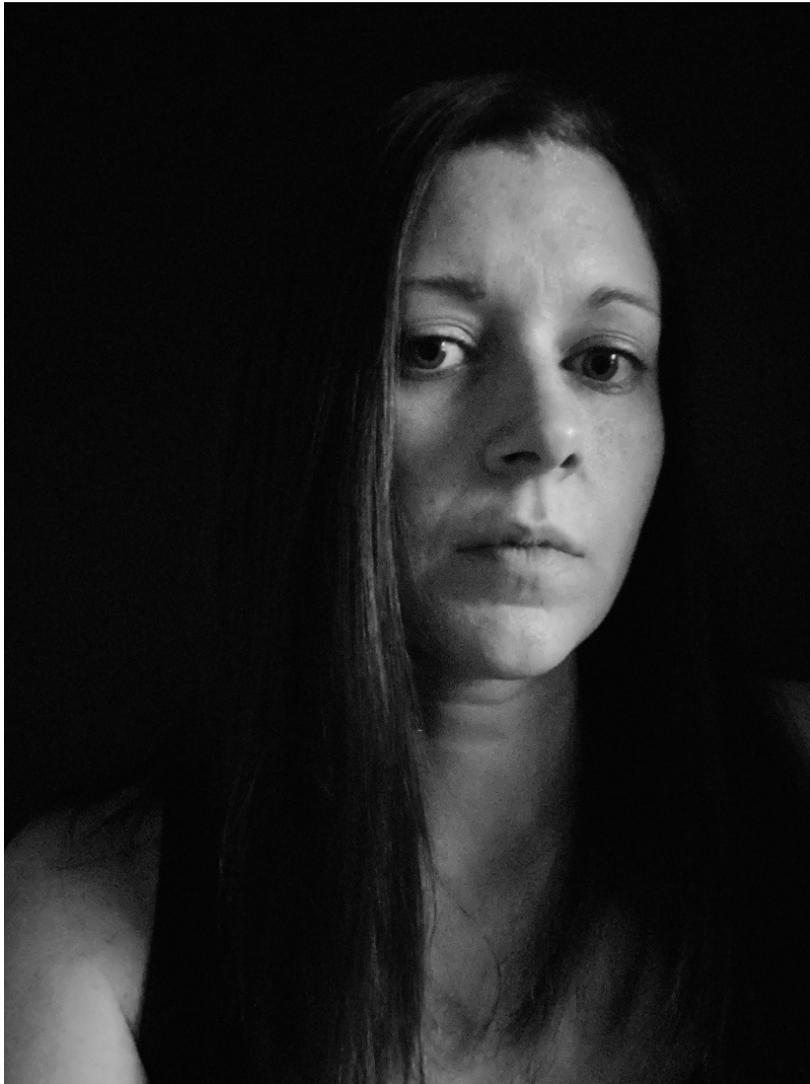
R.R. Wieland

Elizabeth Ann glared at the witches now standing before her. They each bowed their heads in reverence.

Their prophecy was now fulfilled.



-Street-
K.R. Wieland



K.R. Wieland is a fantasy author, dark poet, and an artist.
She spends her time creating with words or pictures.

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Thirteen



Written by Kristin Cleaveland

Once upon a time, in a small village, there was a girl named Alyce who longed to be a witch. She dreamed of it when she made the beds in the morning. She pondered it while she fed her family's geese. She imagined, as she stoked the fire in the hearth, that her mother's iron cauldron was full of magical ingredients, ready to concoct a potion that would make her the most powerful witch in the world.

Alyce's thirteenth birthday was drawing near, and she desperately hoped that on this momentous occasion she would discover her magical power. For, try as she might, she had never been able to cast even the most simple spell. She had chanted an incantation to make her wavy brown hair straight; she'd attempted to turn her green eyes blue; she even tried to produce a potion of luck -- but none of her efforts were successful.

The night before her thirteenth birthday, Alyce could not sleep. She lay awake

“But remember, you are powerful already. Use your confidence, and your wits, and your good heart. That is where you’ll find your magic.”

until the stroke of midnight to see if she noticed any difference in herself. She waited for her skin to prickle, for the hairs on the back of her neck to stand up, for a vision to materialize -- but she felt the same as always. "Maybe it will work in the morning," she told herself, but deep down she was worried she had been wrong.

When Alyce awoke after a night of tossing and turning, she washed her face and brushed her wavy hair. She put on her favorite dress and buckled her best shoes. After she had finished, she walked into the kitchen where her mother embraced her warmly. She was nearly as tall as the older woman now. "Happy birthday, my love," her mother said.

Alyce sat down to a special breakfast of sweet griddle cakes, sizzling fried bacon, and a bowl of fresh blackberries sparkling with sugar. "Mother," she announced as she ate, "Today I will become a witch."

Alyce's mother nodded. "I would expect nothing less. It is your thirteenth birthday, after all. How do you plan to accomplish it?"

Alyce pushed her hair out of her eyes and slumped forward over her empty plate. "I don't know yet," she said.

"I have something for you," Alyce's mother said. "I think it might help."

Alyce sat straight upright. She felt her skin prickling and knew something important was about to happen.

Her mother stood on tiptoe and retrieved a bundle wrapped in twine from the highest shelf in the kitchen. "This was my grandmother's. I think you will find it useful."

Alyce snatched the package from her mother's hands and hastily undid the twine to reveal an old, very worn book. The cover proclaimed, "A WOMYN'S BOOK of SPELLS, MAGICK, and CHARMS." Alyce gasped aloud. "This is perfect!" she exclaimed. "Now I will surely discover my power."

Her mother wrapped her arms around Alyce. "I know you will," she said. "But remember, you are powerful already. Use your confidence, and your wits, and your good heart. That is where you'll find your magic."



Since it was Alyce's birthday, her mother allowed her a reprieve from her usual chores. Alyce tucked a blanket under her arm, picked up her new book, and made her way down to the riverbank, planning to spend the afternoon reading by the water.

As Alyce approached the river, she was surprised to see a young man standing on the bank; she rarely saw anyone there. Indignant that someone had encroached on her special reading area, she made her way toward the stranger.

The young man -- a boy, really -- was dressed simply in trousers and a white shirt, but Alyce immediately noticed that the material was finer than any she had seen before. He had light golden hair, straight teeth, and soft-looking hands. He held a fishing pole, but Alyce saw he had not caught anything. She was immediately suspicious.

He looked startled to see her approach. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," she replied. "My name is Alyce, and I live in the cottage nearest the river. And who might you be?"

The boy looked down at his fine leather shoes. "I am Jonathan -- uh, Jack. My name is Jack." He pronounced it as if trying to convince himself.

"I see. Well, Jack, I have important business to attend to. I will bid you a good day," Alyce said. She walked several paces and spread out her blanket, then opened the book on the ground before her. From the corner of her eye, she could see Jack struggling on the riverbank. He appeared to have a fish hook caught in the fine material of his shirt.

Heaving a sigh, Alyce stood and walked over to the boy. "Hold still," she commanded, prying the hook free. "Your mother will be quite displeased with you. It will not mend easily." Without a word, the boy held out his palm. Alyce dropped the hook into it. Then she looked around. "Where is your bait?"

Sheepishly, the boy pulled some crumbs from his pocket. "I used a sweet roll," he said. "But the fish didn't want it."

Alyce stared at Jack. "You had a sweet roll, and you used it to fish? You are either the richest boy in the county, or the stupidest, or both."

Jack looked at the ground and didn't respond.

A realization dawned on Alyce. "You said your name was Jonathan? You wouldn't happen to be the son of the Duke, perhaps?"

The boy's entire face blushed. Alyce could see the red line of his scalp beneath his light golden hair.

She laughed. "Whatever are you doing here?"

The boy tossed the fishing pole to the ground and sat next to it. "I'm bored," he said. "Sometimes I come here instead of doing my lessons, if I can sneak away."

Alyce considered this. "I suppose I can understand that," she said. "You are probably shut up in that fine house all day, with many tedious duties to attend to, and no friends to play with."

"Why, I am far too old to play," Jack said. "In fact, my sixteenth birthday is tomorrow."

"My birthday is today," Alyce replied, feeling superior. "I am thirteen, and I am going to discover my power."

Jack smirked. "Thirteen? You are still a child. I am almost a man, and tomorrow my father will hold a great hunt in my honor."

"A hunt?" Something unpleasant stirred in Alyce's stomach. "But I am sure you have hunters that provide more than enough game for the castle."

"We do," the boy said, "But this will be a trophy hunt. It's a competition for the largest game -- the biggest elk, or wild boar -- and also for small game. We'll see who can catch the most squirrels, or rabbits -- you get the idea. I'm sure to win."

Alyce abruptly gathered her book and blanket. “I doubt that. You probably hunt as well as you fish. And wild game should be for people who need it. You’ll be taking food out of the villagers’ mouths! And the animals deserve dignity. Their lives are worth more than a silly contest.”

Jack was startled. “It was my father’s idea, and it’s a good one. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, you don’t know how to fish. Or much of anything else, I’d wager.” Alyce stormed off in a huff, leaving the boy on the riverbank with his mouth gaping like the fish he never caught.



When she arrived home, Alyce stomped through the door and straight up the stairs to her bedroom. She sat cross-legged on the floor and opened the spellbook on her lap. “I will show that arrogant prince what he can do with his stupid hunt,” she said. “I am destined to discover my power today.”

She gently turned the pages of the old book until she found a section labeled “SPELLES AND HEXES.” She read aloud:

“BAD LUCK HEX: TIE A LOCK OF VICTIM’S HAIR AND TWO SPRINGS OF BELLADONNA TO AN UPSIDE-DOWN HORSESHOE. BURY OUTSIDE UNDER A NEW MOON.”

Alyce thought it over. Perhaps a bad luck hex would cause the prince to sprain his ankle, or trip over a tree root; anything that would prevent him from sitting on a horse and hunting. But she didn’t have a lock of his hair, and even if she could obtain one, the new moon for that month had already passed. She would have to do something else.

Paging through the book, she found another spell that read: “TO ACQUIRE A DAEMON SERVANT.”

Alyce found this a very attractive possibility. If she could engage a daemon in her service, it could certainly frighten the prince into forgoing the hunt. She read from the spellbook:

“AN ANIMAL FAMILIAR MUST CARRY YOUR MESSAGE TO THE DAEMON. BLACK CATS ARE BEST. TIE A GOLD COIN AROUND THE ANIMAL’S NECK AND SEND IT FORTH. AT MIDNIGHT, THE DAEMON WILL ARRIVE TO DO YOUR BIDDING.”

Alyce didn’t have a gold coin, but she did have a silver locket her grandmother had given her. She would be very sad to lose her locket to a daemon, but she decided that becoming a witch was worth it. She took the locket from the drawer where she kept it in a small drawstring bag. Then she considered her options for an animal familiar. The family had several cats, but none of them were black, nor were they likely to obey her orders. Instead, Alyce walked outside to where the geese strutted, pecking at corn kernels.

She selected the most formidable looking goose and tied the drawstring bag around its neck. Drawing herself up to her full height, she announced, “Goose! As my familiar, I command you to bring a daemon to do my bidding. Go now, and return by midnight.”

Alyce waited for the goose to take flight. Instead, it bent its long neck to the pouch and jerked it loose. The locket fell to the ground and the goose strutted away, honking belligerently.

Disappointed, but also relieved that she hadn’t lost the locket (and even more relieved that she did not have to encounter a daemon), Alyce picked up the bag and went back inside. She pored over the book again until she found something that caught her eye. “TO SICKEN A RIVAL: CRUSH FRESH BLACKBERRIES WITH A HANDFUL OF ELDERBERRIES. SWEETEN WITH HONEY AND FEED TO YOUR RIVAL. HE WILL SUFFER FOR ONE DAY AND ONE NIGHT.”

Alyce thought about this option carefully. The duke’s son said the hunt was to take place tomorrow, so if he was ill, he would surely call it off. Alyce felt slightly uneasy at the prospect of sickening anyone, but the book said he would recover after a day and night. After all, the animals were more important than some stubborn, spoiled boy.

She took a basket from a hook by the door and walked into the trees near her family’s cottage. Alyce knew how to forage -- that was one witch skill she did have. She found a bramble of blackberries and selected the plumpest, juiciest ones. Venturing deeper into the woods, she saw an elderberry bush, branches heavy with fruit. She plucked a generous handful of the tiny round berries, and put all the fruit into her basket.

Upon returning home, Alyce took her mother’s mortar and pestle down from the kitchen shelf. She deposited the blackberries into the bowl, and crushed them with the pestle until the white marble was streaked with their purple juices. She removed some of the blackberry paste and put it into a separate, smaller bowl.

Alyce added the elderberries to the rest of the blackberries and crushed them all together. She drizzled a generous amount of honey into the mixture. When she was finished, she took a hunk of crusty bread off the counter and cut four slices. She buttered them generously, then made two sandwiches: one with the plain blackberry mixture, and one with the elderberry. She wrapped the elderberry sandwich in a cloth and placed it into her basket.

Hastily, Alyce washed the mortar and pestle and put everything away. Then she picked up the basket and the other sandwich and dashed to the river, hoping Jack was still there. She found him sitting on the bank, tossing pebbles into the water. He looked up, startled, when Alyce sat down beside him.

“Catch any fish yet?” Alyce asked.

Jack threw another pebble. “No.”

“Well, that’s no surprise. Next time, don’t use bread. Use minnows.”

“Oh,” he said. “I suppose you’re right.”

Alyce brought her sandwich to her lips and took a large bite as Jack watched. “I bet you’re hungry,” she said. “You haven’t brought any lunch.”

He shrugged. “I’m fine. When I go home, the cook will make me anything I want. I can have three lunches if I wish.”

“Of course. Well, I did bring another sandwich. But I guess you don’t need it.”

Jack looked at her in surprise. “You brought food? For me?”

Alyce was caught off guard at the note of happiness in his voice. Their eyes met, and he turned crimson again.

Alyce sighed. She had very much hoped to become a witch that day, but perhaps her plan needed work. She looked in her basket, then looked back at Jack. “Oh. I thought I did, but I must have forgotten.” She saw the flicker of disappointment in his eyes.

Without a word, Alyce broke her sandwich in two and held out a slice of bread. Jack reached out and took it. He shoved a large piece into his mouth. “This is very good,” he mumbled.

“Of course it is,” Alyce said. “I made the bread and jam myself. And I even churned the butter from our cow’s milk. I bet your cook doesn’t do that.”

The two watched the river as the water rushed by. “I suppose you’ll be hunting tomorrow, then,” Alyce said.

Jack shrugged. “I suppose.” He sounded much less enthusiastic about the idea than he had before.

Alyce sat in silence for a moment, thinking. Then she said, “My cousin lives several counties west of here. And do you know what she told me? When that duke’s son turned sixteen, his father threw a parade.”

Jack looked at her curiously. “A parade?”

“Oh yes,” Alyce replied. “She told me it was the grandest thing she had ever seen. There were jugglers, and pipers, and dancers -- and banners, and streamers, and clowns. And the boy rode on the back of his father’s most handsome horse, dressed in his very finest clothes, and threw candy and sweets to all the children. Everyone cheered for him the whole way.”

“Is that so?” Jack asked.

“It is,” Alyce said, knowing very well that she had no such cousin. “And also, that duke’s son chose a girl from the village to ride another fine horse next to him, and, at the end of the parade, he gave her all the sweet rolls she could carry.”

“Is that so?”

Alyce shrugged. “That’s what she said, anyway. I wasn’t there, of course.”

“Of course.”

They sat together for a moment. Then Jack leapt to his feet. “I think a parade is a much grander idea than a hunt,” he announced. “I will tell my father I have changed my mind, and would like a parade instead. He will do it within a fortnight, I’m sure.”

Alyce finished her sandwich and brushed the crumbs from her fingers. “That is a good idea,” she said. “Very clever of you. Perhaps I will come to the parade, if I am not too busy.”

Jack extended his hand. Surprised, Alyce took it. He helped her to her feet. “Will you be here tomorrow?” he asked. “I might, if I can get away from my tutor.”

“I suppose, maybe,” Alyce said. “When I finish my chores. Bring your fishing pole. I’ll bring a net to catch minnows.”

Jack’s eyes were bright. “All right, then. See you, Alyce.” He turned to walk away, then stopped for a moment. “Oh! And happy thirteenth birthday. I’ll bring you a sweet roll tomorrow. Goodbye!”

“Goodbye,” Alyce called. When Jack was out of sight, she took the elderberry sandwich out of her basket and tossed it into the river.



When Alyce arrived home, her mother was stirring the cauldron on the hearth. “Did you bewitch anyone today, my love?” she asked.

Alyce considered the question. “I believe I did,” she said.

As she helped her mother set the table for dinner, Alyce decided that tomorrow she would polish her grandmother’s locket, and choose some hair ribbons to wear to the parade. Then she’d have to finish her chores quickly, so she could go to the river. Life as a witch would be very busy, but Alyce was ready. She was thirteen, and she was only beginning to discover her power.



-Street-

Kristin Cleaveland



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We are so grateful for the stories written by our talented authors and the powerful poetry submitted by the Dark Poet Society for this month's spotlight. We are continuously grateful to the entire Crow Family for their support and enthusiasm.

I would like to congratulate the authors selected from submissions.

In the sea of short story submissions, your stories breached the surface like humpback whales. I was honored to select them and place them in the magazine.

This issue was a ton of fun to put together and we are excited for the next issue! If you are interested in seeing your own short story in *The Crow's Quill*, please submit on our website:

<https://www.quillandcrowpublishinghouse.com/cqmagazine>

I'd love to take a look.

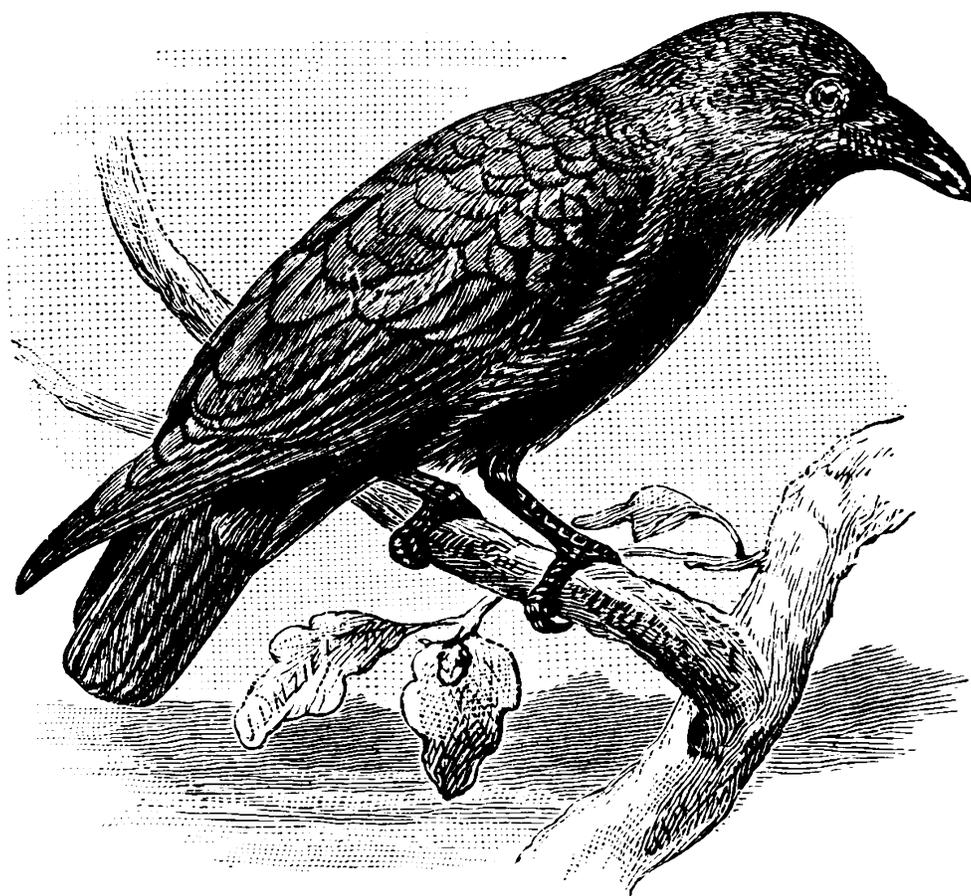
Are you poet? Whether you know it or not, but want to show it, please participate in our daily #CrowCalls on Twitter and Instagram. Feel free to tag me @wbartlett1984 in your post, and you just might get hand picked for a guest spot on our Poetry Blog!

Sign up for our mailing list to stay up-to-date on all the fun things we have planned.

A special thank you to K.R. Wieland for her crow-eye editing assistance.

Sincerely,

William Bartlett, Assistant Editor
K.R. Wieland, Associate Editor



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