

The Crow's Quill



MARCH 2022

BETRAYAL

TALES OF GOTHIC DELIGHT

Lose yourself in five stories about betrayal of the heart, the mind, the soul.

How far would you go for your faith, your loyalty? Would you betray those you hold dear? Would you betray yourself?

Poetry Interludes

Explore the theme of betrayal in two poems by talented members of the Crow community.

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.

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CONTENT DISCLAIMER

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

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

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

Yours,
QUILL & CROW
PUBLISHING HOUSE



ABOUT THE HOUSE

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

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

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

...and we will probably feed you.



QUILL & CROW PUBLISHING HOUSE

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Dearest dark hearts,

This issue is important to me as it's my first as Quill & Crow's Assistant Editor and though we had intended to pause *The Crow's Quill* indefinitely to focus on novels and anthologies, we've decided we could do no such thing. It's a time-consuming labour of love and we don't want to give up on it. We were almost betrayed by ambition, but isn't that so appropriate for the month of betrayal?

After all, the Ides of March nears.

We hope to implement a donation system to fund the magazine soon.

This issue includes five unique stories on 'betrayal,' from clear instances of it, to layered themes and perspectives. We all know the feeling, one way or another, so prepare to feel it again, but within the safety of short, Gothic fiction.

Before I go, I'd like to thank the Mother of Crows, Cassandra L. Thompson, for trusting me with the magazine before, and trusting me with this new role now. I am forever grateful. I'd also like to thank freelance editor Eli Hayden Loft for her hawk-eyed assistance with this issue. She was crucial in its completion while the Crows put together a very special showcase.

Check our socials to find out more about our upcoming project, *Haunted*.

Yours,

Damon Barret Roe

Damon Barret Roe

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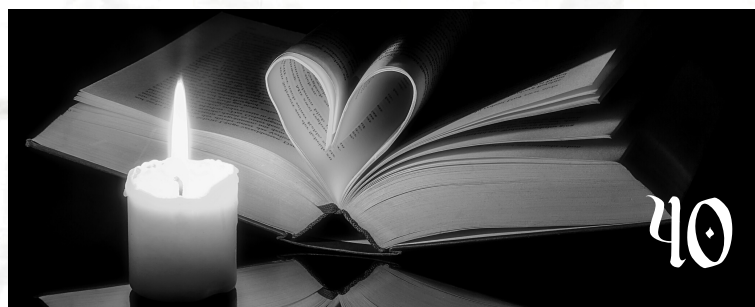
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A comprehensive list of any and all content that may be disturbing to some of our cherished readers.



THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



A Sick Man's Roses



WRITTEN BY
JONATHAN G. TOLENTINO

The healer said nothing, yet his eyes grew wide as saucers. Wallace lay abed and silent, watching the healer study his blood.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” he said. His name was Broadus Bons, a wise old man and the best healer in the kingdom. He lifted jars of fluids to the window so the noonday sun could light them up, muttering to himself.

“Is it bad?” Wallace asked, unsure he was ready for the answer. “Has my health worsened?”

The healer smiled at him. “Worsened?” he said. “It’s gone, Wallace. I’d call it a miracle and, in truth, I am not one to believe in miracles.”

The healer rambled on, talking about the fluids of life and corruption. Wallace understood none of it and didn’t care. It was said that no one recovered from what the townsfolk called the Wasting Disease. When he’d caught it, he thought he’d be



“...a wind of foul
air swept past
him.
It reeked of rot
and blood.”

dead within the month. He had been feeling better the past few days, however; its sudden absence had worried him—made him think it would come back and kill him in the night. But his fears had been for nothing. He would live.

“I can’t wait to see Sariah,” said Wallace. They had kept him away from his family for too long. The Tower of the Sick disallowed visitors, be they family or friends, and his wife was no exception.

One night, he’d heard her wailing outside his window. “LET ME SEE HIM! LET ME SEE MY WALLACE!” she had screamed like a wild cat. It had frightened him a little—made him worry about what she might do in her grief.

As soon as he was released, he would return home, embrace her, and relieve her of it. There was nothing he missed more than her golden hair and emerald eyes. His daughter, Wanda, would be waiting too. Her hair was chestnut like his, but her eyes were as green as her mother’s. The sweet girl had sent him red roses from the garden every day. The aroma brought him comfort in the sick room. Broadus’s servants had taken and delivered them to Wallace as he lay ill. “You’re a lucky man to have such a caring daughter,” one had told him.

As soon as Broadus released him, he ran to the tower’s exit, alerting some of the guards. They grabbed him and were about to drag him back up the steps, but Broadus assured them he was cured and allowed to leave. “Wouldn’t you like a horse or a carriage?” Wallace heard the healer shout as he sprinted down the hill toward the city below. Feeling so strong and healthy, he didn’t think he needed one.

He ran through the streets with a smile on his face, shouting about his victory over the Wasting Disease. The townsfolk looked at him like he was a madman. A jeweler’s shop had a mirror set up for buyers; he stopped and admired his reflection. His hair, which the disease had turned white and thin, was thick and brown again. “I even look ten years younger,” he whispered to himself, running his fingers through it as a short, plump merchant yelled at him.

“I’ll charge you if you’re just going to look at yourself,” the jeweler barked, waving a walking stick at him. “Move along! My customers want to use it.” Wallace apologized with a stupid grin and continued on his way.

He saw an old farmer loading a wagon by himself. Wallace politely asked where he was going as he helped him. When the farmer knew they were going the same way, the old man kindly offered him a ride.

Wallace owned a fine estate outside a village named Melton with a large house of white stone and a pretty rose garden behind it. When they arrived, he thanked the

farmer and, still overjoyed about his recovery, hugged him. The farmer looked nonplussed as he continued down the road. The sun had just slipped beneath the mountains, and the first stars were coming out.

The house was empty and dark. They had a few servants, yet he saw none of them. “Marley?” Wallace called out. But the old washerwoman did not show herself. “Andrew?” *If he was gone, Wallace thought, how long had he been away? The house was a mess, and it was Andrew’s job to maintain it.* “Sariah? Wanda? Anyone here?” He ran upstairs but found no one. His joy was melting away, worry taking its place. “Where did they go? Do they think I’m dead?” He sat on the steps and thought. “Sariah has a sister. Her name was Miranda. I wonder if she’s visiting her.”

His mouth was dry, so he set off for the pantry, looking for something to drink. When he passed by the basement door, he noticed it was ajar. A terrible odor escaped from within. “What is that smell?” he whispered to himself. When he opened the door wider, a wind of foul air swept past him.

It reeked of rot and blood.

Though his stomach churned, he lit a taper and walked down the steps to the basement. The smell became unbearable. He realized it wasn’t the smell of some summer-warmed butcher shop. No. It was the smell of death. Wallace felt weak and sick again, mind filled with black thoughts. *Oh, Sariah, my dear Sariah.* He remembered how grief-stricken she had sounded. Hot tears ran down his face. *Have you done something to yourself?*

Wallace saw her. She knelt in the center of a painted circle; an amalgamation of strange scarlet symbols. Dozens of candles lay before her, and she appeared to be reading a leather-bound book, muttering words in a foreign language. One that sounded unnatural. Within the circle sat several vials of red and black sands.

“Sariah,” he said weakly. “I have recovered, my love. Master Broadus healed me.” The stench made his belly roil. “Even he was surprised—”

There were wooden posts set in the floor that Wallace didn’t remember seeing before. What hung from them made him vomit the soft foods the healer had given him that morning. Was that Miranda’s body nailed to one of them? She was naked, and a blade had opened her from neck to navel. There was nothing in the red flesh within, the organs removed. Andrew had his own post as well. Like Miranda, his folded hands were nailed above his head, a stream of blood running down to his elbows. He kept his innards, however, but his eyelids were sewn shut.

Wallace thought he was dead until he turned his head slightly to his voice. He

would have jumped if his voice weren't so weak. "Master Wallace... H-help me. I...am in such *pain*." The man sounded near death, to be sure. It was far too late for Marley, who hung beside him. Someone had removed her head. There were two strangers, a man and a woman, each occupying a post; Wallace did not know if they were still alive.

Before he could free Andrew, Sariah stood and faced him. She had a long dagger in her hands; its blade coated red. Bits of flesh and hair clung to its surface. "Do not free him, my sweet Wallace," his wife said, oddly calm. "The circle remains open. He must suffer." There were spatters of dried blood on her cheeks. Her smile made him shiver.

"Gods, Sariah," Wallace said, his heart beating hard. "Did you do *this*?"

There was gratitude in her tone as she spoke. "The King of the Black Salts has brought you back to me." She dropped the dagger and ran to him, hugging him tightly and forcing her mouth on his. Wallace did not return her kiss. There was blood on her lips and her teeth. Behind her, it looked like she was eating something dark and wet. "It had to be done, my love. A kind man from the woods visited me. He showed me such beautiful things, *taught* me such beautiful things. The outworld monarchs have such *power*." As she spoke, she ran her bloody fingers through his hair. "He taught me how to save you and now, you are here. The King of the Black Salts be praised!"

He shoved her away, this woman that he had once called his *love*. Oh, how he had once found great comfort in her arms. "How could you?" He looked at Miranda's bloodless face. "And to your own sister? Have you no heart, Sariah?"

Sariah laughed madly. "She once did," she said, pointing. "But the King wanted it, you understand? You shall not deny him of his desires. He has breathed life back into you, and we are in his debt. Oh, Wallace, my love. I would sacrifice this entire realm for you. Come to me. *Come*."

Wallace backed away. He didn't know this monster. A torturer, a killer, and a butcher was all he saw. "I do not know you, Sariah. You are not the woman I loved." She looked different as well. She had grown very gaunt, her skin thin and sallow. It was as if she had taken the disease from him. It was as if she had taken the disease in his place. "That sweet Sariah is gone," he murmured. "The mother of my..."

Wanda, he thought. *My little Wanda*. A sudden fury possessed him. The shadows seemed to darken. They danced and shifted into horrid shapes. "*What did you do to her?*" His anger had him tightening his fingers around her throat. "*WHAT*

DID YOU DO TO OUR LITTLE GIRL?” Andrew was saying something weakly, but Wallace could not hear him.

“I love you, Wallace,” Sariah managed to say through her clamped throat. “No one comes between us. No one—”

His fingers tightened even more. A whisper from an unseen stranger needled his mind. It wanted death. He closed his eyes. Suddenly, she went limp.

The beast inside him left. “Sariah,” he whispered, eased his grip on her thin neck. When she did not respond, he gingerly laid her down. “What have I done? Oh, how I wish the disease had killed me. Why didn’t you let me die?” He began to weep, heaving sobs racked his body and echoed in the room.

“Master Wallace,” Andrews said a little louder. “Master Wallace.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, wiping his tears as he rose. “I’ll get you down.”

“Master Wallace, your daughter ran. Little Wanda ran. I know not where she is but...”

Even with the vile miasma surrounding him, he could still smell a hint of roses.



Jonathan G. Tolentino



Jonathan G. Tolentino is a dark fantasy writer who lives in northern California. When he's not creating dark tales, he can be found reading about late medieval history or catching up with his favorite comic book series. Building fantastic worlds and creating magical beasts are just a few things he loves about writing.

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THE CROW'S QUILL
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Beneath the Shining Sun



**WRITTEN BY
ALFRED SMITH**

A bead of sweat trickled down Alessandra's cheek, and she cursed the heavy ceremonial robes. The dark fabric was already soaked with sweat, and still the sun beat down. They could have done the ritual stark naked for all the powers being invoked cared. But no. Edward of the Bronze Hand and Silver Face insisted on enough pomp and circumstance to make a playwright roll their eyes.

Birdsong filtered through the air in a lilting blend of melodies, and a mountain wind whispered through dense pine trees. Somewhere nearby, a stream splashed as it made its way down towards civilization. An idyllic scene by all accounts, and the perfect place for a bit of dark magic.

Her mentor carved another rune into the hard earth, muttering incantations in a low, constant stream. In the center of the growing circle, tied to an altar, their captive stirred. Alessandra stepped over the carved runes and checked the knots binding his hands and feet. As she did, she whispered into the hooded figure's ear,



"The sun did not care what was done beneath its callous eye. The moon did."

“Just a little longer. Edward is completing the circle.”

Mishal stayed slack in his bonds, the drug Alessandra had slipped him keeping his limbs from working. He managed to grunt an affirmative through the fabric of the hood. She let her hand brush along his bare chest, fingers tracing the wards tattooed into his very flesh. An intimate gesture more suited for the bedroom than a sacrificial altar.

Her lips grazed his ear through the fabric of the hood. “Sit tight, my dear. We’ll be done soon enough.” She straightened back up. Alessandra turned from the altar and walked to the edge of the circle, taking care to step over the inscribed runes.

“Dig the channels.” Edward’s voice was muffled by the heavy silver mask he wore. Another pointless bit of theater. Not only did the thing hold no power, his face was carved on the surface.

Alessandra fought to keep the venom out of her voice. “Yes, sir.” Six years working for Edward, for the scraps of knowledge he was willing to give her—six years of her life spent in drudgery for the old toad. But the time hadn’t been wasted.

She picked up a bronze spade and a silver compass from the pile of tools, and set to work. Alessandra checked the compass and knelt with the needle facing precisely north. The earth resisted the tool’s blade, the metal too soft for this sort of task. As with all of Edward’s equipment, it fed into his theme. At first it all seemed part of his power, but Alessandra had come to realize that the runes were the important part—the runes, the blood, and the good graces of the moon.

She carved a furrow in the ground leading from the edge of the circle to the altar. Then added one for each of the cardinal directions. Mishal stirred each time she approached, and she whispered another soothing platitude to him.

By the time she finished the fourth channel, the sun had almost vanished behind the mountain. That time of year, they still had at least an hour before the moon’s gaze found them. Alessandra’s heavy robes were stained with dirt and sweat, and she wiped a grimy hand across her brow.

Edward had moved on from digging to preparing the transference tincture. A dark, ichor-thick potion that would let him absorb Mishal’s power once his blood was released from his veins and into the inscribed circle.

Alessandra stowed the bronze spade in the bag, the tool bent and twisted to uselessness by the firm earth. She extracted a silver dagger and slipped the blade into the belt of her robe. It brushed against the one at her hip.

“Attend me.” Edward gestured for her to approach. Alessandra kept her gaze on

the ground and moved to stand beside him. She practically towered over his hunched and twisted form. “It’s not every apprentice who gets to witness a siphoning.”

Alessandra gave a demure bow. “Yes, sir.”

“Serve me well. Help me capture a few more of my rivals, and perhaps I will teach you the ritual.”

That was a brazen lie. Only a handful of warlocks knew the ritual to extract power from another practitioner. Once she reached her full potential, she was far more likely to end up on the altar instead of inside the circle. It was part of the reason for her bargain with Mishal. “Yes, sir,” she said again.

“Remove his hood. I would like to see him before the deed is done.”

Alessandra strode to the altar and undid the hood. Another pointless waste of time. Better to drain the blood and be done with it well before the moon rose. The sun did not care what was done beneath its callous eye. The moon did.

Mishal blinked in the waning light, his deep brown eyes still glassy with the drug. Even insensate, there was an air of power around him. The man was handsome as well. Dark hair and a well trimmed beard, with just a touch of grey in both.

Edward also hobbled to the center of the circle before removing his mask. Sweat glistened on his pasty face, and his thinning hair stirred in a breeze. His face, split in a wide grin, revealed yellowed teeth. “Yes,” he hissed. “It is I of the silver mask and bronze hands that have brought you low, Mishal.”

Alessandra tuned his ravings out and reached for the concealed dagger. The hilt buzzed with power as she wrapped her fingers around it, the sensation traveling up her arm and setting her teeth on edge. The result of the lessons Mishal had given her—lessons Edward didn’t know about.

“Alessandra?” She snapped back to reality. “The blade, please? It is time.” Her mentor didn’t turn in her direction, instead extending one bronze-painted hand out to her. Expectant.

She pulled the blade from her robe, fighting to keep her hand steady. Before she could consider further, before she could second guess herself, she brought the dagger down.

The wicked, sharp tip pierced the mundane cloth of Edward’s ceremonial robe as though it were paper. A normal weapon would have stopped there, upon meeting the ensorcelled tunic Edward wore beneath the robes. The dagger parted that with the barest hint of resistance.

Edward had time to turn his head, his eyes wide and wild. She sliced through the

defenses tattooed on his flesh. Without the magic, he was as mortal as anyone else. Alessandra plunged the weapon into the hollow of his clavicle, straight down towards his heart.

Her former mentor let out a weak gasp, then slumped to his knees, one hand clawing at her wrist. She pulled the dagger out, and blood splattered across her face. He fell forward, face first in the dirt. Another spurt of blood splashed onto the side of the altar. Then a third, weaker than the first two and, after a few more modest gushes, it subsided into a trickle. The blood flowed through the channels she'd dug, and the runes flared to life in a virulent crimson.

Alessandra's hands shook. She'd done it. Years of work. Then planning in the dark with Mishal. Luring Edward into their trap. Her heart pounded as the sweet thrill of success rolled through her whole body.

"Yes!" The word came slurred from Mishal's lips. "Now. The tincture. Give it to me and—"

Alessandra cut him off by pressing her lips to his. Her tongue pushed into his mouth, and he let out a little moan. She held the kiss, her free hand tangling in his hair. The other hand thrust the dagger up beneath his ribs, its magic slicing through his wards just as it had with Edward.

The moan cut off with a gagging cough, and she tasted blood. Alessandra shuddered at the *power* it contained. She pulled back from the kiss, her lips stained. "I am sorry, Mishal." He struggled weakly against the bonds as she pulled the dagger free. His blood poured from his side, running down the altar's sides to flow through the channels. "But why give you my mentor's power, when I can take yours too?" She released her grip on his hair, and the runes glowed with a crimson bright enough to hurt her eyes.

Mishal's pained eyes were wide, but in a few heartbeats some vital spark faded, helped along by the drug still coursing through his veins. Alessandra shrugged out of the heavy robe, revealing her simple tunic and trousers beneath. She licked blood from her lips and shuddered again. She couldn't access the power without...

She reached into Edward's robe, pulling out the vial of dark ichor he'd prepared. She pulled the stopper free and put it to her lips. Before she could tilt it back, the black fluid *leaped* from the vial and into her mouth.

Pain lanced through her as the substance burrowed into her tongue. Down her throat. Whatever it was, it worked its way into her flesh. Into her bloodstream. An ink-black spiderweb appeared beneath her skin, the substance spreading through her

veins. The pattern grew with every beat of her heart, down her arms and legs.

Alessandra fell to her knees, dagger dropping to the blood-soaked ground. Her fingers curled in the hard, unforgiving earth. The ichor dripped from her nails, from the corners of her eyes, from her toes even, worming its way into the ground as well. Finding the power. Siphoning it into her.

She threw her head back in a primal scream—of pain, of triumph. In the back of her mind, she could hear Mishal screaming. And Edward. Dying shrieks they never had the chance to utter amplified a thousand times in her own thoughts.

The dark fluid leaked from her pores, from her lips, drawing more and more of Mishal and Edward's power into her. Another scream, this one raw. And another—until her voice was torn and ragged.

By the time the ritual ended and the power had been drunk fully, the sun had vanished behind the mountain. Alessandra's breath came in ragged gasps. The crimson runes had vanished, burned away. The altar, too, was gone, as were both the bodies. The only evidence of her betrayal the power coursing through her body. She held up a hand, the dark veins fading from view.

She drew a deep breath, and spread her arms wide, welcoming the moonrise. Welcoming its judgment.

The moon's gaze fell on her. Alessandra knew it was pleased.



Alfred Smith



Alfred Smith is a father and rowing coach in Pittsburgh, PA who is trying to turn writing into a full time career. He is a member of SFWA and organizes the Parsec Short Story Contest.

When not writing or coaching, he enjoys tabletop gaming and trying to stop his dog Happy from licking his daughter Hope (and vice versa).

It's a losing battle.

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A CROW'S

POETRY INTERLUDE



Mesmerized,
Livid,
My feet rooted
To sodden earth, I wait.

His familiar,
Once-beloved,
Form emerges,
Lurching,
From the swirling brume.

Vexatious man.
How many times
Must I inhume you
Before you learn?
Your place
Is in the hell you intended
For me.

SUZANNA LUNDALE

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Home Sweet Home



WRITTEN BY
SALLY GALES

The first thing she noticed as she stepped out of the car was the smell—car exhaust mixed with cigarette smoke before being spiced by garlic, cumin and paprika. The heady aromas stuck to the inside of her nostrils, turning her stomach.

“I’ll only be five minutes.” Ellen waited for the driver to respond.

He didn’t.

She shut the car door and jumped as her phone buzzed. Ellen fished the phone out of her pocket but, as soon as she saw the number, she sighed and put it back. They’d been calling all morning. She’d deal with that later but, first, she needed to finish what she’d started.

Ellen stepped over the remnants of a rusted metal fence and followed a weed-infested path towards the leaning, one-story structure. She passed an old tire, a metal drum, and bits and pieces of fast-food wrappers that had replaced what used



“The largest hill of detritus unfolded itself from the floor. Rags in every shade of grey hung in tattered icicles from the creature’s body.”

to be a front lawn. She walked on despite the vacant neighboring houses that stared at her through their broken windows, speeding up as a loud bang echoed in the distance. It wasn't until she reached the threshold, no longer guarded by a front door, that she stopped.

Light from the setting sun flooded the tiny interior. One room to serve them all: kitchen, living, dining, family, study, play, and bedroom. The house was gutted. Furniture and anything of value had already been 'repurposed' by the neighborhood; only smatterings of rubbish had been left behind to hibernate. The largest pile stood heaped in the center of the room. She waited. The hairs at the back of her neck tugged her back towards the door. She didn't move. And after a few minutes, she sagged in relief. It'd been done. The house was vacant.

But Ellen had to be sure. She paced through the home and stopped in front of the door to the bathroom. Patches of blue struggled to be seen past the wall's quilt of grime and spray paint and there, by the door frame, was a barely visible mark. It could have been a shadow or an extra dark spot of dirt. Ellen bent to get a closer look. She pulled a tissue from her pocket and rubbed at the spot until black flaked off the wall like ash. A letter emerged: 'E.'

"Elena?" a breathless, voice croaked.

Ellen jumped and turned towards the sound. She scanned every inch of the small room and peered into the shadows. There was no one there. She pulled her coat tighter around her body. It was probably the wind carrying a neighbor's voice. It didn't matter; it was time to go.

"Elena?"

"Who's there?" Ellen took a step back. She tried to sound strong, authoritative—unafraid. She hated the way her voice shook at the end.

"Elena?"

The largest hill of detritus unfolded itself from the floor. Rags in every shade of grey hung in tattered icicles from the creature's body. Lace, cotton, canvas, wool—it was a monster of textiles and, as it moved, its fabrics whooshed against one another. At the top of its body, unruly curls of black, grey, and white sprung out in every direction. It moved slowly, arthritically. "Elena, *mija*, is that you?"

Ellen's heart sank.

From the creature's depths, a spotted hand emerged. Stiff fingers grasped at empty air. "Oh, *mija*, I was hoping you would come. They told me I had to go but I knew, I just knew you wouldn't let them... You'd come back..."

The voice was cut off by a dry, racking cough that shook the rags like ostrich feathers. The painfully familiar sound finally loosened Ellen's tongue. "What are you doing here?"

She had assured her company that she'd taken care of the situation. If the council found out—if any of the protestors caught wind—construction would be delayed by weeks, if not months. They'd been searching for any excuse.

"You're not supposed to be here. The bulldozers are scheduled for 8 am tomorrow. What if I hadn't—"

"I knew you would come, *mija*. Elena, you can't—"

"My name is Ellen, mom. And you're not supposed to be here. I could lose my job because of you. Is that what you want?" She paced the length of the room. "How did you get here? Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"Elena, this is our home. You cannot tear it down. You cannot—"

"No," she shouted, silencing them both.

She stared at what her mother had become and pulled her worn coat closer. She'd tried to help; she'd done everything she could. This wasn't her fault.

"No, *mamá*. This is not our home. This hasn't been our home for a long time. This..." She gestured to the hovel surrounding them. "This isn't fit for *un marrano*." She shook her head. Her mother always brought the Spanish back to her tongue.

"Elena, please."

Her mother tried to grab her hand but she stepped out of reach.

"You will love your new home, *mamá*. You'll see. They have hot water, cable television, fresh, home-cooked meals. *Mamá*, you can make friends. This is for your own good. Can't you understand that?"

Her mother crumpled to the ground. "Elena. Elena..." she repeated like a prayer.

"Wait here for me, *mamá*. I need to go deal with the driver. Then I'll wait with you. We'll go to your new home together. You'll see... Don't worry. I'll take care of everything. And I'll visit you all the time. It can be like it used to, *mamá*. Don't you want that?" Ellen stood over her mother. "But you have to wait here. You can't go outside. No one can see you. *Mamá*, do you understand what I am saying?"

Her mother rocked back and forth. "Elena. Elena. Elena."

Ellen reached out, stopping short of touching her shoulder. "It'll be ok, *mamá*. It'll be ok. Just wait here."

Slowly stepping around the shaking rags, she walked out into the fresh, twilight air. The car and driver still idled by the curb. Ellen inhaled the aromas of her past—

sancocho, aji, fried meat—and looked back at the shadowy hill of trash that had become her mother. Pulling out her cellphone, she finally called back the number that'd been haunting her all day.

“Home Sweet Home.”

“Hi, this is Ellen...Elena Morales. You were supposed to pick up my mother this morning.”

“Oh, yes, Ms. Morales. We've been trying to get a hold of you—”

“Yes, I already know. It's ok.”

“Ms. Morales—”

“My mother is with me at the house now. I'll wait here with her. If you could send someone over right away, I promise she won't cause any more trouble.”

There was a pause on the phone. Ellen checked to make sure she hadn't been disconnected.

A new voice came from the other end. “Ms. Morales?”

“Yes, call me Ellen. I was just telling the other person, I'll wait here with my mom —”

“Ellen, my name is Dr. Insan. Do you remember who I am?”

She exhaled in exasperation. “Yes, hi, Dr. Insan. I spoke with you about admitting my mother. I don't know why they're bothering you with this, though. We just need a transfer.”

“Ellen, where are you?”

“I already told the person who answered the phone. I'm at my mother's old home. I came here to make sure she'd vacated the building but she's still here. I'm happy to wait—”

“Ellen.” The voice on the other line took on that tone of ‘please remain calm miss’ that made Ellen's teeth clench. “We picked up your mother a year ago.”

“What? No, that can't be right. You must be mistaking us for someone else.”

She paced along the dirt, raising clouds of brown and grey that stuck, accumulating on her coat.

“Ellen.” Again, that voice. “Ellen. Your mother passed away last month...”

Her ears rang. She turned back to her car. It was gone. The husk of a stripped, burnt-out town car stood in its place.

“...you were at the funeral...”

A figure sat in the front seat. She lurched towards it, only to be greeted by a pile of plastic trash bags.

“...do you remember checking yourself in...”

Turning back to the house, Ellen ran through the open door—her mother had always loved to keep it open—but the house was empty. She tore through her home, throwing up scraps of paper and dust in her wake. There was no one there.

“...we’re sending someone...”

A sharp pain on her wrist brought her attention back down to her arm. Her coat, covered in black and grey rags, reminded her of molting feathers. Her nails, bitten down to the quick, were encrusted with dirt, creating brown crescent moons to highlight the grime covering her hands. And, on her wrist, barely covering the bruises wrapped around it, was a white plastic bracelet with the name ELENA printed in black ink.

A laugh—more a cough than an expression of joy—slipped past her lips.

“...Ellen, we’re on our way. Stay...”

Another one.

The more Ellen laughed, the harder it was to stop. She gripped her stomach and the different textiles covering her body crinkled against her skin. Falling to her knees, laughter ripped out of her mouth as tears slipped down her cheeks. The voice in her ear said something she couldn’t understand before hold music filled the line.

“...Home Sweet Home. Let us bring you back home...”



Sally Gales



Originally from South Florida, Sally Gales earned a Doctorate of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow and currently lives in Scotland.

She teaches writing at various universities, and has taught an intro to world-building Masterclass for the Guardian. Sally's work has appeared in the anthology *Scotland After the Virus* and *New Writing Scotland 39*. When not writing, she's usually out walking her greyhound or climbing with her partner.

Twitter: @SallyGales
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A CROW'S

POETRY INTERLUDE



false words you spit
like acid to my face
promises you break
cynicism roots in place
secrets you hide
cowardice you embrace
betray my kindness
my loyalty you'll disgrace
show me you're fake
and Hades you'll awake

WILLIAM BARTLETT

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Late Harvest



**WRITTEN BY
NEWTON**

“Knock, knock?” Vanessa looked up from her book to see a young man in scrubs standing in the doorway of their hospital room. “May I come in?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” she replied.

“Sorry to disturb you all, but the doctor requested another blood sample.”

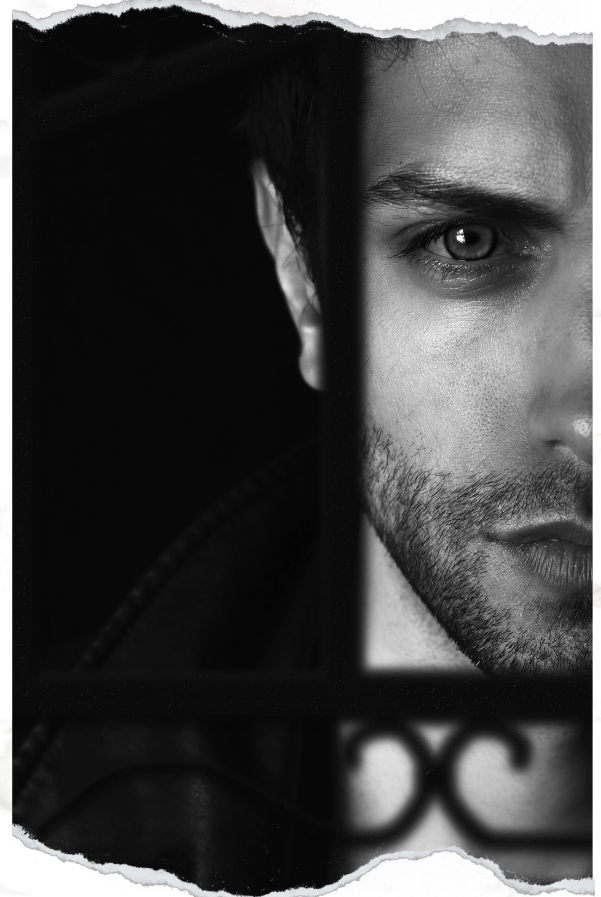
“Another one?” she asked, looking at her mother. “She literally just got to sleep.”

It was well after eight o’clock in the evening. Thanks to winter, the sun had set hours ago. Vanessa had hoped that she, and her mother, could finally get some rest after the long, stressful day.

“I can do it without waking her,” he said. “Promise.”

“I guess,” she conceded.

The nurse slipped into the room and crossed over to the bed. He leaned over



**“No matter how sweet
nor sour, thy
Forbidden fruit may
be,
You can keep the
Fallen, whilst I collect
the tree.”**

and whispered in her mother's ear while he lightly pinched her arm, inserted a syringe, and drew up a vial of blood. True to his word, she did not wake, but she did smile knowingly, as if dreaming the punchline of an old joke remembered.

"How did you do that?" Vanessa asked as he finished labeling the tube.

"I told her not to worry because it was summertime and I was just a mosquito." He smiled.

"Well, it seems to have worked."

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"Virginia Woolf."

"Lock up your libraries if you like, but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind," he said, quoting Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

"You're a fan?"

"Of Woolf? Not really. But of classic literature? Yes. I prefer Keats. Big fan of Oscar Wilde."

"I'm impressed," she said. Based on his appearance, he couldn't have been more than thirty. He was tall and thin, with chestnut brown hair and eyes to match. Attractive, but not overly so.

"So what's the prognosis, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Stage Four lung cancer," Vanessa said sadly. "They're releasing her tomorrow. We'll be heading home for hospice care."

"Oh geez, I am so sorry. How long have you been here?"

"This was day six," she replied.

"Six? Wow. Well, my name is Anthony and, if there is anything I can get for you—anything at all—just let me know."

"All I really want right now, Anthony," she said, "is to get us out of this hospital and back home."

"What's your name?"

"Vanessa."

"My shift is over in about a half an hour, Vanessa. Can I take you out for a drink, or some dinner, or something?"

"What?" she asked, surprised by the unexpected offer.

"I'm sorry," he quickly replied. "That was entirely too forward of me."

"Well," she began, "I mean, I probably shouldn't leave her alone."

"Go," came her mother's raspy voice.

Vanessa turned to see her mom's eyes flutter open. "Are you okay, mom?"

"I'm fine," her mother quietly responded. "Go on, get out for a bit, sweetie. I'm not going anywhere."

"Are you sure? I could..."

"I'm sure," her mother insisted. "Go get some fresh air."

Vanessa turned back to Anthony, who stood in the doorway waiting patiently. "Um...okay."

"Great." He smiled again. "I'll be back in just a little while."



Anthony was new to the area, so she suggested going to The Verona Café, one of her favorite haunts. The funky, old, dimly lit place had been a downtown institution for decades. Its narrow halls and vaulted ceilings were covered in multi-colored and mirrored tile mosaics and embellished with random street signs and severed doll heads. A green neon sign that read 'Shitters' directed patrons to the unisex bathrooms downstairs, while the upstairs lounge was adorned with taxidermy mounts of owls and ospreys. A large bar and small stage dominated the main floor. The owner, a 1960s-era beatnik named Doug, who billed himself as 'The World's Most Dangerous Poet', prowled about like a caged tiger.

"This place is wild," Anthony said between bites of a patty melt and fries.

"It's fun," Vanessa agreed. "It's been here forever. They have a great patio set-up in the summer. And it's close to the University hospital."

"Sorry about your mom. I know this has to be a rough time."

"It is," she admitted. "Thanks for coming here with me. I needed to get away for a few minutes. I was going crazy. I know that must sound terrible."

"Not at all. I've seen enough to know that situations like these can be just as hard on the caregivers as they are for the ones in need of care. Sometimes even more so."

"I don't know what I'll do without her," Vanessa's eyes filled with tears. "Dad passed away four years ago. Ever since then, it's just been me and her. I told her to quit smoking for years. She didn't want to come to the hospital. Even when she was coughing up blood."

"People can be pretty stubborn about their conditions. Like there is no problem as long as they don't admit that there's a problem."

They chatted for an hour, enjoying each other's company until the house lights went down mid-conversation. The stage lights came up as Doug, the beatnik poet

owner, bounded onto the stage.

“I have a new poem for you all,” he announced. “It’s titled The Unknown.” The crowd applauded enthusiastically.

“The Unknown is the difference between guessing wrong or being right.

The Unknown is the reason we cursed the dark and pray for the light.

The Unknown is the Meaning of Life or a cure for cancer.

The Unknown is the force that endlessly drives us for answers.

The Unknown is the pause before you decide whether you will, or you won’t.

The Unknown is the Devil you know versus the Devil you don’t.

The Unknown is yours and also, it’s mine.

The Unknown is alive and it’s doing just fine.”

The crowd cheered its approval as Doug triumphantly leapt from the stage.

“Well now, that poem was really, uh...something,” Anthony proclaimed.

“No kidding,” she replied. “We should probably get going.”



Vanessa sat at her desk, pen in hand, and wrote his name.

Anthony.

It’d been a week since their impromptu date at the Verona Café. They’d spoken on the phone every night since. He’d be coming by later for take-out Chinese and Netflix.

She was beyond excited to see him. Not only because they seemed to mesh so well, but also because she’d been horribly lonely. A consequence of the home-care hospice morphine machine her mother had been given was that she slept most of the time, leaving Vanessa more or less on her own.

She tried to write a poem about him, but the words would not come. Instead, she simply wrote his name over and over again, overembellishing the A and adding a floral flourish to the Y. The sun slowly set outside her window, and she felt, for the first time in a long time, something akin to hope.

When she heard his car door slam outside, she nearly leapt for joy. She quickly checked her face in the mirror. She’d had very little sleep and exactly zero make-up the night they’d first met. The opposite was true now, which she hoped would make a dramatic impression.

She met him at the door.

“Knock, knock,” he said.

“Come on in, silly,” she replied.

“Wow, you look stunning,” he told her as he entered.

She beamed. “Thank you.”

“How’s your mom doing?”

“She’s okay. The pain meds really knock her out.”

“Yeah, they’ll do that.”

“Did you stop and get Chinese?” she asked, noticing that he was empty-handed.

“Got something even better.” He reached into his coat pocket and produced a small, yellow egg.

“What is that?”

He held it up for her to inspect. “Here, smell.”

As she leaned over to sniff, he pinched the egg. The shell didn’t crack, but compressed and emitted a puff of sweet-smelling smoke. Vanessa involuntarily inhaled and immediately fainted.



As she slowly regained consciousness, she realized she was in the living room, sitting in her mother’s recliner. She could feel the well-worn upholstery beneath her, smell the cigarette smoke forever trapped in its fabric. But she couldn’t move. Her eyelids were too heavy to lift at first. When they finally rose, however, she was dumbfounded to see Anthony and her mother sitting on the couch holding hands.

“There she is,” Anthony said. “That took longer than expected.”

“What’s...going on?” Vanessa mumbled.

“We were just about to depart,” he said. “I was afraid we weren’t going to get the chance to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye? What are you talking about?”

“Full disclosure,” Anthony began, “I’m not really a nurse. I’m a broker, of sorts. I deal exclusively in rare and unusual commodities. Like your mother.”

“My mom?” Vanessa asked, panic mounting as she realized that her hands and feet were secured to the recliner with duct tape.

“You see, your mother here is what we would call a ‘late harvest.’ Blends like hers are exceedingly rare and almost always snatched up early in life. Take it from me, it’s incredibly uncommon to find one so...well, let’s just say, of her vintage. I could

hardly believe my luck when my contact at the hospital called me.”

Anthony produced a hypodermic syringe from his coat pocket and jabbed it into her mother’s arm. He drew a measure of blood into the syringe and then casually yanked it back out. To Vanessa’s horror, he then snapped off the needle, stuck it in his mouth and pressed the plunger, emptying the red liquid into his mouth. His eyes glowed an unsettling yellow as he savored the taste. To Vanessa’s horror, her mother simply stared into space, completely unaffected.

“Exquisite,” he sighed, licking his lips. “The smokiness adds a whole other dimension to the flavor. We’ll need to wean her off the morphine, of course.”

“He said he can save my life, Nessie,” her mother said dreamily. Her eyes were glassy and she rocked slowly from side to side.

“Well, what I actually said,” Anthony began, “was that we have ways of keeping her alive. Until we can find the right buyer anyway. I know a number of clients who are going to be very interested.”

“No,” Vanessa sobbed. “Mom, wake up! Why are you doing this? Mom!”

“It’s nothing personal, Vanessa. This is strictly business,” he said, as they rose from the couch and walked to the front door. Anthony carefully ushered Vanessa’s mother outside. A car door opened and subsequently shut. He stepped back into the house, alone, holding a bottle of clear liquid.

“I am truly sorry,” he said, emptying the contents of the bottle onto the living room carpet, the couch, the curtains. It smelled of alcohol. “You’re a great girl. Wrong place, wrong time. You know how it goes.”

“No!” she screamed, struggling in vain against her restraints.

“You like poetry, right?” He chuckled. “I wrote a poem for you. Here goes:

*No matter how sweet nor sour, thy Forbidden fruit may be,
You can keep the Fallen, whilst I collect the tree.”*

“Anthony, please,” she cried. “Don’t do this.”

“Silly child. My name’s not Anthony,” he laughed, striking a match.



Newton



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

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

Twitter: @19NEWTON73

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Before the One

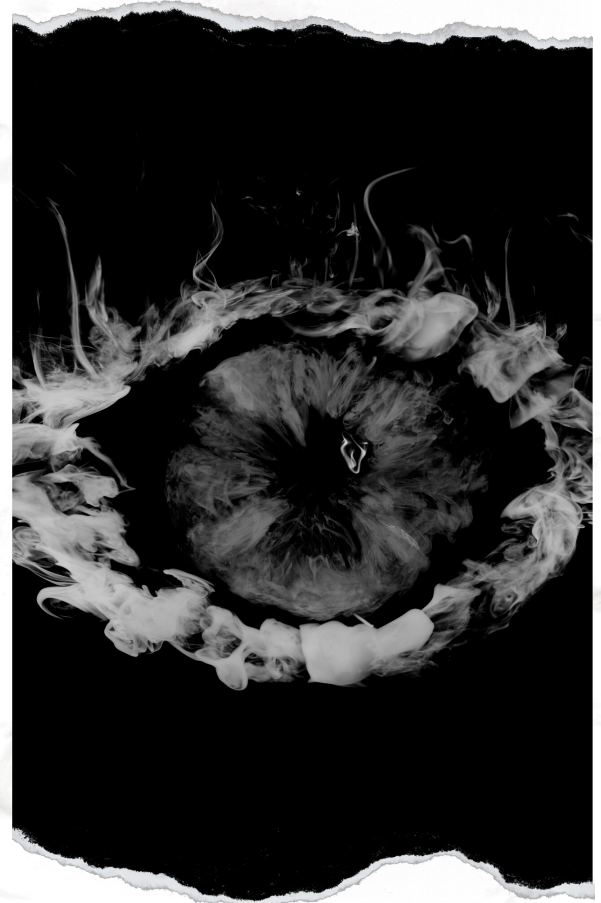


**WRITTEN BY
JOE WOLF**

Seven figures shivered before the crowd. Each stood hooded, more than an arm's length apart, waiting for the ceremony to begin. A cold mist fell upon those gathered in the square, but they dared not let it deter them.

Out of the fog loomed the Temple of the Law, its stone columns rising above the heads of the onlookers. Red banners flowed from either side, each marked with the black eye of the One. The sunburst pupils stared down at them, as if judging the seven lined up on the dais. Even the One was watching today.

The crowd parted for the procession. The hushed whispers went silent as the line of red-robed priests marched toward the dais. The citizens kept their eyes down, as though they dared not look. Those who attended knew their place—and what happened to those who didn't. The Speaker, back straight and gray hair glistening with dew, led six others. Moreau came last. He had been given the high



"Moreau's own son brought the first heretic before him, making them kneel with their head positioned above the stone."

honor in today's ceremony. He was to hold the knife.

The Speaker mounted the steps and turned on his heel to face those gathered. Five priests passed him and took their places before the line of figures. Moreau could not help but glance at the youngest among them. His son stood proud, chin held high. He was Moreau's spitting image—same nose, same strong chin, same jet-black hair slicked down by the weather. Only his stark gray eyes differed from his father's face.

Moreau stifled a smile as he took his place behind the Speaker. His son had worked for years to be part of a ceremony. Despite the solemn events about to unfold, Moreau could hardly contain his joy.

The Speaker addressed the crowd. "Citizens, today we bring before you those who would destroy the order of our great city—those who selfishly push back against the One and His plan." Murmurs spread through the crowd, but most nodded along or cast their eyes down in penance for those lost. They understood the gravity of their neighbors' offenses.

"Today, we bring before you seven miscreants. We stand here to beg for absolution, to take their sins upon ourselves and, in so doing, be forgiven. Their sentence shall be execution before the One. My Brother will read their crimes."

One of the five stepped forward and read from a list. "Heresy. Seditious. Conspiracy. Treason..." The list went on, many of the offenses echoing recent executions. Moreau's blood boiled at the thought. Why did so many shun the harmony of the One? Why did so many think only of themselves when their beautiful city existed for the benefit of all?

The Brother finished and stepped back into line. "Witness!" the Speaker boomed before leading the crowd in the Invocation. Moreau prayed along, thanking the heavens for their blessings, begging their mercy for transgressions. It was a comfort, reciting the Invocation with a thousand other voices on such a momentous day—for the One, and for Moreau, His hand meting out justice. The Invocation was a thousand hands reaching up in support.

When it ended, the Speaker turned and offered Moreau a dagger. He bowed as he lifted the blade from his superior's hand. It was a ceremonial piece, the sunburst eye etched into the blade sharpened for its duty. The two of them took their positions—the Speaker off to the side, an observer, and Moreau before the stone block at the dais's center.

The other priests took the seven heretics and brought them forward, one by one. Each wore a formless black robe, their faces covered with dark canvas hoods—their

identities blotted out while they awaited their fates, all equal in their sentence. Only at the last moment would their faces be uncovered. It was a last mercy, a chance to beg forgiveness of the One before passing into His embrace.

Moreau's own son brought the first heretic before him, making them kneel with their head positioned above the stone. Moreau removed the hood and recognized the face beneath.

The man was a dock worker who frequently delivered goods to the temple. He had always been deferent when approaching the priests and had done his work well, smiling as he'd conversed with them. The smile was gone, replaced with naked fear. He knew what this was, what was coming. Moreau's heart went out to him. How easy was it for them to fall? How tempting was the evil in the world if it could bring even this jovial spirit to commit the most heinous of offenses?

Moreau's knife came up and met the man's neck. His eyes bulged, but he hardly made a sound. His son held the man as he bled over the stone—his life an offering for his sins. The Speaker stood by, muttering supplications to the heavens. With any luck the man's soul would be saved. Moreau closed his eyes and muttered a quick prayer for the prisoner's repentance.

A minute passed, and the blood stopped flowing. Another priest stepped forward, and the two hauled the body away. The man's blood pooled in grooves cut around the pedestal, soon to be saturated with their offerings.

The second prisoner was brought forward and made to kneel in the blood. Moreau removed the hood and saw a woman he did not recognize. He performed the same rite, and the woman bled all the same. She had tried to cry out, but nothing escaped her cut throat. The same prayers were uttered, and the woman died quicker than the first. Moreau raised his eyes to the temple banners as the body was removed. He asked the One for the strength to mete out the day's harsh mercy.

The third came, and the fourth. Moreau treated them with the same reverence he did the first. All were equal on the pedestal—rich or poor, man or woman, priest or lay—all that mattered was that they repent. What remained was between them and the One, Moreau was merely the messenger.

He drew the hood off the fifth, and Moreau's stomach dropped as his wife's brother glared back at him. He couldn't believe it, but there was no mistake. Moreau tried to move, but his arms were frozen. His brother-in-law was a good man, how could he have become involved with such a crowd?

He began to speak, and Moreau panicked. His arm moved on its own, the knife

burying itself in the prisoner's throat. The man he thought of as his own sibling choked on his final words, and his life blood joined the growing pool spreading across the dais, overflowing from its channels and staining Moreau's shoes.

Moreau hardly thought to pray before the corpse was taken, and the sixth was brought forth. He went through the motions with a man he did not recognize, but his mind raced. His brother-in-law had always been devout, obedient. If such a man could be corrupted, who was safe? The stranger's body was taken away. The final prisoner was walked forward and pushed to their knees. Moreau reached forward and pulled away the hood.

A pair of bright gray eyes stared back at him—like his son's eyes, with the same cleverness and life behind them, only in a thinner face. Blonde hair stuck to her forehead and cheeks, plastered on by sweat and condensation. He knew that face better than any other. He refused to believe it. It was impossible.

But here she was.

She did not cry, or look angry or even apologetic. Her eyes held only sad acceptance, as if this was meant to be. His eyes darted to the Speaker, whose hard gaze gave nothing away. He knew. He must have. He had allowed Moreau to hold the knife today and put her last in the order because he knew it would be hard. No, impossible. He couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to raise the knife to her. He wouldn't.

His gaze returned to her face. Her eyes were closed, and her shoulders had begun to shake. She said nothing. She didn't beg him for her life, for she knew he couldn't grant it, but neither did she offer comfort. She simply sat there, waiting for the end.

It was a test. It had to be. The Speaker wanted to see that he would go to the furthest lengths for the One, that he was willing to set aside his attachments to put an end to heresy. That was the only explanation. Her silence destroyed him. Would she love him for this? Hate him? He couldn't know. Did he even want to?

He didn't dare look at his son. The One only knew what he was thinking.

He knew what was required. He steadied his hand and raised the dagger. He told himself it was necessary. They all had to live in the One's light, or they would all be lost. Every soul that strayed put them in danger.

The whole ceremony was an act of the One's love. Moreau was simply the knife in His hand, offering a last chance at penance. He looked into the beautiful face of the woman he loved so dearly as he grasped the back of her neck. As if on its own, the knife found purchase.

In His mercy, Moreau ended a seventh life.

Joe Wolf



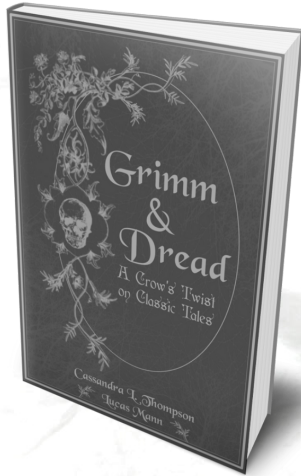
Joe Wolf is a writer, mechanical engineer, and unapologetic fantasy enthusiast. He loves reading and writing stories of all stripes, from lighthearted hero's journeys to bloody grimdark. Joe has worked as a freelance editor and proofreader, writes short stories for fun, and is currently editing what he hopes to be his debut novel, *The Soul of War*.

He currently lives in Little Rock, Arkansas with his wife, Liddy, and their two cats, and spends most of his time wishing he had more time to write.

Twitter: @blaguards

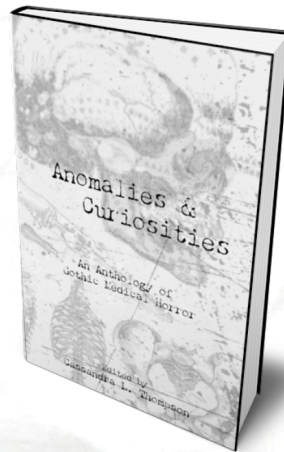
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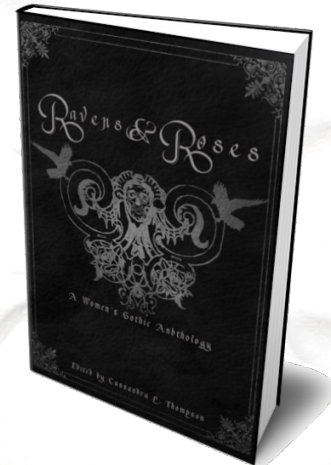
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are so grateful for the stories written by our talented authors, and we hope you enjoyed the poetry contributed by two of our House's poets. Thank you, Crow family, for your continued enthusiasm and support!

A deep thank you to everyone who submitted a story. It is truly special for us when you share your works, regardless of their acceptance. While your story may not have been chosen, next month's theme is *Rebirth & Renewal*. If you are interested in seeing your story published in *The Crow's Quill*, please check our website for more details. We'd be honored to have a look.

Are you a poet?

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

Keep calling and we Crows may answer.

Sincerely, from Quill & Crow's Assistant and Associate Editors,

Damon Barrett Roe

L.R. Wieland



TRIGGER INDEX

- **Decapitation**

mentioned ◆————◆ *A Sick Man's Roses*

- **Disembowelment**

mentioned ◆————◆ *A Sick Man's Roses*

- **Disfigurement**

mentioned ◆————◆ *A Sick Man's Roses*

- **Homicide**

choking

mentioned ◆————◆ *A Sick Man's Roses*

stabbing

mentioned ◆————◆ *Beneath the Uncaring Sun*

throat slitting

mentioned ◆————◆ *Before the One*



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