

The Crow's Quill

NOVEMBER 2021

TALES BY THE
FULL MOON

Poet
Spotlight

STORIES OF GOTHIC DELIGHT

Nine short stories,
one theme: the
moon.

These are tales that
encompass the feel
of the House:
dark, intriguing, &
dreadfully
macabre.

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



QUILL & CROW
PUBLISHING HOUSE

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.

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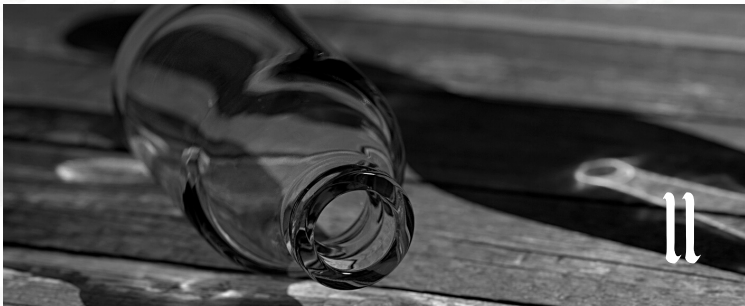
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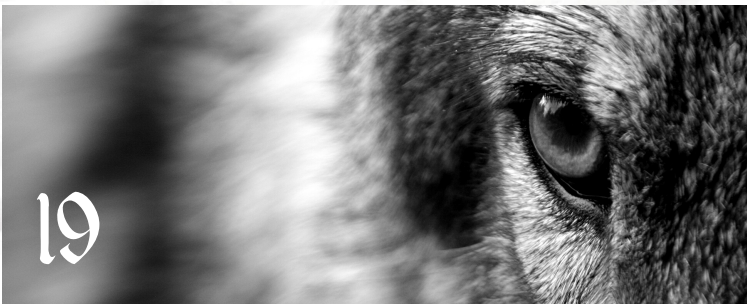
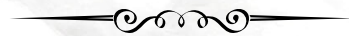
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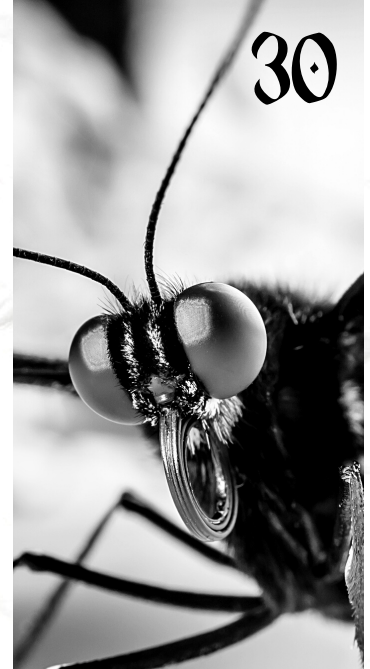
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associate editors **Damon
Barret Roe** and **K.R.
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QUILL & CROW PUBLISHING HOUSE

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.

The Crow & Her 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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Dragon of darkness
in human form.

A NOTE FROM THE CROW

For as long as humanity has existed, we have been mystified by the moon. Haunting, powerful, and ethereally beautiful, the moon has inspired many a tale and mystery. For this issue, we hoped to capture that magic in our own modern storytelling.

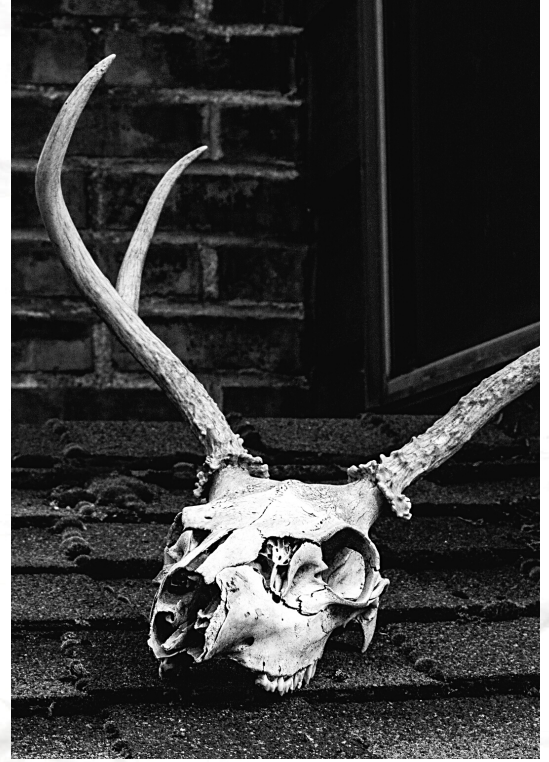
One of my favorite parts of having a literary magazine is the ability to select meaningful themes and watch how different writers bring the same topic to life. Each one of the stories in this issue brings a unique perspective that I was pleased to bring to life.

I would like to take a moment to thank William Bartlett for his tireless contribution to this magazine and another heartfelt thank you to Damon Barret Roe for gracefully picking up where William left off. This issue would not be possible without her, nor the efforts of Kayla Wieland, another one of our cherished editors. I'm looking forward to seeing where *The Crow's Quill* will go from here in their capable hands.

Quill & Crow publications often deal with evocative topics that can prove triggering to some. As always, please apply discretion as you explore the intriguing stories captured in this collection.

Dreadfully Yours,
Cassandra L. Thompson





Lula and the Girl with No Name

WRITTEN BY A.L. GARCIA

*They were of the wind, the wild, and the Wendigo,
She was of the moon.*

We sit in a circle around the embers of a dying campfire, my eyes darting from one pair of eyes to the next, scanning their gaunt, grimy little faces for any sign of impending deception. These woods are not made for the unsuspecting. I furrow my brow as I reach the new foundlings, a pair of emaciated blondes. Their big, pea-green eyes remind me of the dried sphagnum moss bunched up in my pocket. I reach for it and stand, calling out for the rest of the crew to smother the campfire and get some sleep. The blondes sit, paralyzed by my glare as I walk towards them, and whisper "You two, come with me." I lead them to my small stick shelter camouflaged by layers of pine branches in between two large oaks. The twins, I call them, for the way their roots grow into each other. I hand one the moss, "Here, hold this."

**"It is as if she were
flying towards the
moon. She reaches the
crescent and descends,
her shadowy figure
almost evanescing
beneath the silver
sickle."**

Keeping my gaze on them, I reach inside my shelter for my waterskin and two tin cups. I notice their breathing slow down as they see the heavy waterskin, their mismatched heartbeats betraying the cold, dead look in their olive eyes. In one seamless move, I drop the tins and reach for my hunting dagger, unsheathing it with a flick of my thumb and a swift swipe of my arm. In my fighting stance, I growl, "Try me, you will regret it."

The taller one falls to his knees with his hands up, then tugs at the tattered shirt of the shorter one. The youngling stands defiant, the scant moonlight filtering through the canopies gleaming in his verdant eyes. He lunges, the taller one on his heels. I react, as I always do, my whole miserable existence flashing before my eyes, as every movement blends instinctually into the next. I lean forward into the shorter one's attack, plunging the dagger into the soft meat of his underbelly. His body folds over me as I tighten my grip and twist the knife before dragging it across his hips, disemboweling the unfortunate fiend. I roll onto my back, kicking him off me, cringing as his blood and viscera spill over my arm, torso, and face. Then gather my limbs into a crouching position.

The tall one shrieks, "*KRAAL!*" as he charges at me. I pause. It is the first time I have heard a name since the coming of the Wendigo. A long-forgotten memory flashes through my mind, obscuring my senses for just a moment. He tackles me to the ground in my stupor, wrapping his hands around my throat. "He was just thirsty, you crazy, fucking stray. I'm going to kill you!"

I look around as my eyes roll back and notice all the shadows around us. The whole gang surrounds us like a pack of wild animals silently waiting for a victor in the darkness. I close my eyes, wrap my legs around his waist and squeeze, channeling all my energy into my thighs until I hear the brittle bones of his ribcage snap. I squeeze harder. *CRUNCH*. He wails in agony as his grip on my throat loosens. I cry out, "*Aut neca, Aut necare!*"

The pack howls in unison, chanting the phrase as I push him off me, panting and grabbing at my throat. I stagger into the safety of my shelter, leaving them to their morbid devices.

I shut my eyes, drag my hands across my face and sigh. I'm so tired, but I can't let them see that. The savages. All the remnants of the children they once were, gone. *What am I protecting? What have I become?* The stench of the bodies being prepared for consumption coupled with the irritating sound of their blades flaying the wretches down to bone is not exactly a lullaby. Still, I sleep, knowing the ghouls won't betray me tonight. They have their meat.

I wake at the witching hour, surrounded by complete darkness, knowing it will be dawn in a few hours. I follow the moon, so I don't lose track of time or direction, like others have. She is to the far east of us now. Her light, always a welcome comfort in the almost permanent gloom of the dense forest. I step out of my shelter. The pack cleaned up the mess well, and with everyone in their shelters fast asleep, the wind whistling through the trees is my only companion. A crow caws in the distance. I look up, squinting my eyes to catch a glimpse of it, but see instead, a large sylphlike figure soaring high above the edge of the trees. I rub my eyes,

thinking, *I must be dreaming*. I look up again and see her still. It is as if she were flying towards the moon. She reaches the crescent and descends, her shadowy figure almost evanescent beneath the silver sickle.

My eyes remain fixated on the spot until I hear a twig snap behind me. I turn, but there is nothing. It is time to go. I leave my shelter in place, taking only one of my waterskins and leaving behind two for the pack. Despite their turn towards the barbaric, I have loved and known most of them since they were nearly babes; actually, since I was nearly one. I still remember the tales of how our families fled with us into the forest when the Wendigo came. I remember my mother and father holding them off as we ran deeper and deeper into the wild. We ran until our toes bled and our legs failed us, in all directions. Children scattered, like dandelion seeds across the vast, wet, green and black abyss. We found each other over time, as we struggled to survive in our harsh new environment with the Wendigo picking us off as they saw fit. We formed packs to protect each other, at first. Then, the rivalries began. Desperation led to envy, depravity, death, then bloodthirst, and eventually cannibalism. Pack members disappear overnight. No one trusts anyone. Even our minds belong to the Wendigo now. No one remembers who they are. No one remembers their own name, but even if we did, it wouldn't matter. We are nothing but meat. I look around at the campsite, knowing exactly where each shelter is camouflaged.

I feel tears welling up in my eyes as I turn my hand up toward the moon at an angle, making an "L" with it. I line my index finger up with the horns of the crescent moon and find the path I will take. The salty, wet liquid streams down my face as I slip away from the campsite toward the moonlight, willing myself to never look back. I move more swiftly than I have in a long time, unencumbered by my responsibility to the pack. I cover my tracks, knowing I have taught them too well for my own good, knowing they will come for me too. My stomach growls. My lips ache with thirst. *There is no time to worry about food. Even if there were, this south side of the woods is almost devoid of the small birds and rabbits I am used to hunting*. I sigh, then take a long drink from my waterskin and keep going until exhaustion sets in. I crawl into a hollow at the base of a giant sequoia, just as dark clouds begin to consume the evening sky, curling myself into a fetal position to sleep.

In the morning, I wake to the sound of voices in the distance. *Oh no, I have to move*. I look around, catching a glimpse of a black willow to the east and take off sprinting. The ground is moist and slippery from the storm. I stumble as I reach a muddy ravine, unable to stop myself from rolling down towards the stream. I end up on my hands and knees at the base of the ravine, covered in sludge. I crawl over to the water's edge, looking down to see a haunted, grim reflection staring back at me. *Who is that? Is that me?* I strike at the water to make it go away, then cup some in my hands and splash it onto my face, attempting to collect myself. The unexpected sound of hissing startles me out of cryptic thoughts. I stand and start backing away from the water. *Snakes*. What seems like hundreds of them emerge from the stream, slithering towards me as I turn and run.

A million memories flood my mind, blinding me, emotion overpowering all my senses. I stumble again, landing hard on my knees and forearms. I lay there, ready to give up. *What am I surviving for?* A crow circles the sky above me, cawing vociferously. I lift my head up, noticing we are in a clearing. *I must be dreaming.* I look back at the dark woods, then forward. There is a small cottage in the distance, standing alone in the middle of the clearing. I watch as the crow flies over to it, perches on the roof, then flies away. I pick myself up and walk over to the cottage, feeling as if I am floating. I knock at the door, “Hello, is anyone in here?”

A short, round-faced, old woman with silver hair opens the door. “Greetings, my dear child, we have been expecting you.”

I cock my head. “Expecting me? Who are you? How are you even alive? Am I alive?”

The old woman smiles, “I am Lula. You are, and beasts have no power here. Come inside.” I follow her into the cottage where a wooden table is adorned with a feast of freshly fried fish, and assorted fruits, nuts, and desserts. I close my eyes and breathe in the scent of the household. *This can’t be real, but I don’t care right now.*

I hear a door creak and glare in the direction of the sound. An old man walks in from what seems to be a garden. He smiles. “It is for you, young one. We have been waiting ages for you to return to us. Please, eat.”

I eat more than my fill, in a state of euphoria, becoming increasingly convinced I have actually died and gone to Heaven. I look over to them when I finish. They are sitting at the table watching me. I wipe my mouth, clear my throat, and ask, “Why can’t I remember you?”

Lula replies, “We are spirit guides, the spirit guides of your people for centuries, in fact. You have been lost in the wild for longer than you know. The beasts you know lie within you. Your kind lost their way during the great famine. When your families turned on each other, some of you fled into the forest. Your people became the beasts you have come to know as the Wendigo out of desperation and necessity. You were too young to understand, but now is not the time to speak of these things. It is time for you to rest, my child. Sleep.”

She waves her hand over me, and my eyelids grow heavy as lead. I feel myself drifting off into a peaceful slumber as Lula cradles me in her arms. I let myself collapse into her bosom and dream of places I have never known, of homes, just beyond the horizon. I know where I have to go. When I wake, the cottage is gone. I am alone, face down in the middle of the clearing. I stand, look back at the woods and see two small figures through the trees looming over another. I rub my eyes and try to focus. *The pack,* I think. I start walking toward them. They look up at me, startled, then turn and run into the trees. I pick up the scent of death again and hang my head. I breathe, turn back toward the open horizon, toward life, and run.



A.L. Garcia



A.L. Garcia lives in Massachusetts with her loving husband and two spirited children. She spends her days reveling in the chaos of her babes, writing, reading, and balancing other obligations, as many mothers do.

She also manages marketing/PR for Quill & Crow Publishing House. She began writing poetry as a youth as a way of coping with abusive family dynamics. She joined the writing community in August 2020, after independently publishing a personal narrative detailing the abuse she endured as a child. She is a veteran of the U.S. Army and studied Sociology and Social Science at Towson University.

She has two poetry collections out, *Broken Things* and *Broken Heart Mosaics*, is featured in all the *Crow Calls* volumes, and in *Ravens & Roses: A Gothic Women's Anthology*.

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The Drowning of Moira O'Clery

WRITTEN BY E.P. STAVS

The moon was beautiful that night, the way its light danced across the gently rolling waves of the bay. It called to her, begging her to shed her worn dress and allow the moon-kissed ripples to caress her skin, lulling her unborn baby to sleep inside her womb.

She smiled, lifting her face to the heavens as she waded further in.

"Moira!"

She waved at the shadowy figure of her husband as he jogged across the rocky beach. "The water is absolutely delicious tonight, Seamus," she called, leaning back and allowing the water to embrace her. "You should join me."

"Moira, look out!"

She blinked, her husband's shouts breaking through her blissful reverie. "What?"

"Behind you!"

"Her eyes widened in horror as she ran frantic hands over her flat stomach, searching for the child that had been growing there just moments before."

Her body moved in slow motion as she turned, and her heart seemed to stop altogether as she faced the wall of water looming above her, its frothy head waiting to consume her.

"My baby," she whispered, hands moving instinctively to her rounded belly.

Only it wasn't round at all.

Her eyes widened in horror as she ran frantic hands over her flat stomach, searching for the child that had been growing there just moments before. A scream tore from her lips as the skin on her arms grew pale and mottled in the moonlight.

"Moira!" Her husband's voice cut through the rush of water as it crashed down, engulfing her trembling frame. "Moira, wake up!"

She sat up with a gasp, hands gripping the quilt with white-knuckled intensity. Seamus sat beside her, his face wreathed in concern. "It was a dream," she whispered, only half believing the words as they came out of her mouth. It'd been so...real. "Just a dream," she repeated, gaze dropping to her stomach. Round, thank God.

"You didn't drink your tonic today, did you?" Seamus cupped her cheek, his touch as gentle as his voice was firm. "The midwife said it was of the utmost importance that you take it every day. Not only does the baby need it, but it would help you rest more easily."

"It tastes like something you would get off the floor at the fish market," Moira complained. "It makes me sick to my stomach just smelling it. It's better off as fertilizer, if you ask me."

"Let me guess," Seamus groaned. "You dumped the one I fixed for you this morning in the garden?"

"I thought the beetroot would appreciate it more than me," she countered, wrinkling her nose as she thought of the pungent liquid Seamus had been forcing down her throat for the past several days. "And besides, our midwife never told *me* I had to drink the nasty stuff." She rubbed her belly thoughtfully. "In fact, I don't think I've even seen Shauna since I started taking it."

"She's probably keeping her distance so you don't throw it in her face," Seamus retorted, chuckling softly. He eased himself off the bed before leaning down to kiss the top of her head. "She's more than familiar with that temper of yours," he added, making his way to the kitchen.

"Oh, poor you. It's not like you have to carry a tiny person around in your gut everyday or anything." She swung her legs around, pushing the blankets off as she struggled to her feet. "And now I have to pee," she grumbled. A gush of water soaked her nightgown as she stood, and she gaped at the growing puddle between her feet. *Did I really just pee all over myself?* She shook her head, dismissing the thought. *Don't be daft, Moira. Your waters broke, is all. That happens when the baby's ready to come.* She gasped. *The baby!*

"Seamus! Come quick!"

There was a pounding of feet, followed by her husband's worried face peering through the doorway. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"Not exactly," she replied, nodding down at her soaked gown. "At least, I haven't felt anything

yet. Can you fetch Shauna for me?"

He stared at her nightgown, mouth moving silently. Finally, he managed to work a few words out. "What happened?"

"My waters broke," she explained, biting back the need to add "obviously."

"But—but that's impossible," he breathed.

"Actually, it is possible. Expected, even." She gave him a confused look. "Now, are you going to fetch Shauna for me, or do I need to get her myself?" She planted her hands on her hips, but he seemed oblivious to her exasperation as he paced the floor, muttering about the impossibility of it all.

A shock of pain ripped through her lower back, sending her to her knees, and she let out a keening moan. "Seamus, please," she gasped. "I need Shauna."

"The tonic," he muttered, nodding to himself. "You just need to drink the tonic. Then everything will be fine," he added, hurrying out of the bedroom as Moira stared at his retreating figure.

"I don't need a bloody tonic, I need the midwife," she hissed, dropping to all fours as another wave of pain tore straight through her back into her abdomen. *Too fast. It's happening too fast.*

Seamus was back in a flash, liquid sloshing from the cup he held as he rushed to crouch down by her side. "Drink this, Moira. It'll make it stop, I promise."

"Why would I want it to stop?" she gasped, rocking herself back and forth. "I'm having our baby, Seamus. As much as it hurts, I still want it to happen."

"Please, Moira, just drink the tonic," he begged, holding it up to her lips. The acrid smell sent bile churning through her stomach, and she turned her face away. There was another spasm of pain, even more intense than the last, and she slapped the drink out of Seamus's hand as a scream wrenched from her throat. He swore, scrambling to retrieve the overturned cup.

"Damn it, Moira, you needed that!"

"What I need," Moira screeched, "is Shauna! This baby is coming whether you like it or not, Seamus O'Clery."

"No, it's not!" he yelled back, hands gripping his hair. "It's not coming tonight, it's not coming tomorrow, it's not coming ever!"

Moira felt the blood drain from her face as she stared at her husband's manic expression. "What do you mean, *not ever*? That doesn't make sense, Seamus. Of course, the baby is coming."

His hands dropped to his sides as he hung his head in despair. "It's not," he whispered. "There is no baby, not anymore. It died thirteen days ago." He squeezed his eyes shut before adding, "Same as you."

The room spun as she tried to process what he meant. I'm...dead? She looked down at her hands. They didn't look like the hands of a corpse. She shook her head. "No. No, you're lying. The baby and I are fine." A wave of pain hit, punctuating her statement with a sharp hiss.

"I'm so sorry," Seamus sobbed. "She said you'd never know. That you'd stay with me so long as you drank the tonic she gave me every day, and that someday you'd forget all about the baby that never came."

He'd lost his mind. That was the only explanation Moira could come up with amid the increasingly painful contractions. "What are you talking about, Seamus? Who told you that?"

"The mountain witch," he whispered.

If she hadn't already been on the floor, she surely would have collapsed upon hearing those words. Everyone knew the mountain witch couldn't be trusted. "She's the one who gave you the tonic? Not Shauna?" She stared at her husband in disbelief. Surely, he wouldn't be so foolish.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Oh, Seamus," Moira cried. "How could you do such a thing?"

"I didn't have a choice," he insisted. "You were dying, and she was my only hope of keeping you."

"Impossible," Moira whispered, clutching her belly. "I would remember something as huge as dying."

Seamus's reply was cut off as the cottage door slammed open, and he leaped to his feet as the witch's face appeared in the bedroom doorway, her long, black hair obscured by the hood of her blood-red cape.

"I see my bairn has finally ripened," the witch purred, brushing off Seamus's protests as she swept into the room. "And on the night of the full moon—how fitting."

"Get out," Moira hissed, struggling to her feet. "You're not welcome here."

"After all I've done for you, this is the welcome I get?" The witch *tsked*. "And to think I've kept your rotting corpse alive long enough to deliver your bairn. So ungrateful."

"Do I look like a corpse to you?" Moira screamed, pushing the witch back toward the door. "Now, get out!"

The witch caught hold of her wrist. "Actually, dearie, it's you who should get out." She proceeded to drag Moira across the floor of the main room before tossing her out into the night. Moonlight washed over her, revealing pale and bloated skin that was mottled with bruises. "Perhaps now you'll see things more clearly."

Moira stared at her arms and legs in horror. "What...what's happening to me?"

"Nothing, my dear. The moon is simply illustrating what your blinded eyes have missed—the true form of a woman drowned."

"Seamus!" Moira shouted, trying to see past the witch's hovering form. "Seamus, help me!"

The witch chuckled, kneeling down beside her and running a hand over Moira's belly. "Your coward of a husband is probably hiding beneath his bedsheets. He was so afraid to lose you, and yet now he's too afraid to face what he's done. Typical."

"Please," Moira whispered. "Just leave us alone."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," the witch replied, laying a hand on Moira's shoulder and

pressing it against the ground, pinning her down as she swung a leg over Moira's thighs. Her other hand moved between Moira's breasts, and the tip of her fingernail tore at the fabric of her nightgown, ripping it open so that her pregnant belly was exposed. "You have something I want," she added. Her fingernail sank down again, only this time it was soft skin and sinew that the talon tore apart, splitting her abdomen in two. Black blood oozed from the open wound, forming congealed streaks down her sides.

Moira screamed.

She struggled.

She cursed and spat in the witch's face as the woman leaned forward, sliding her hand into the open womb. The baby she pulled out was nothing short of perfection. Matted red hair clung to the baby's back, and its tiny fists waved in the air as it belted out with all the gusto of a newborn babe.

"Hush now, sweet girl," the witch crooned, wrapping the baby in the folds of her cloak. "Mama's got you."

"No," Moira rasped, her throat suddenly raw as the last of her energy diminished. "Please, no. Don't take my baby girl."

"If it weren't for me, she'd already be dead," the witch hissed. "Drowned along with her worthless mother, who was foolish enough to go out for a boat ride with a storm rolling its way in. You should be thankful your daughter lives at all." She turned on her heel and strode off, leaving Moira where she lay, broken both inside and out.

"No," Moira sobbed. "Please."

They were almost out of sight when a tiny face peeked over the witch's shoulder, blinking sleepy eyes that glowed in the moon's soft light, and the sweetest voice she'd ever heard filled her mind with perfect clarity.

"Mama."



E.P. Stavs



E.P. Stavs is the author of the Young Adult fantasy romance series *The Shendri*, as well as the New Adult psychological thriller *Split Therapy*, and various gothic horror shorts.

When she isn't writing, she's usually reading, mom-ing, or simply being a fun-loving nerd.

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A CROW'S
POETRY INTERLUDE



THE END

This requiem I have written
Long before I've gone
Will be read by the man in the moon
Out on the starlit lawn
I wish for my ashes to be spread
Along the edge of the dark pond
Precisely at the stroke of midnight
And the mourners shall weep until dawn

GINGER LEE

Poet Spotlight

THE CROW'S QUILL 
presents

GINGER LEE



Twitter: @glee_writes

Tell us what you know about dreams?

My brain and body are very much involved in my dreams. When I have a nightmare, I am very aware, yet I am paralyzed. I can't breathe, nor find my voice or move at all. It is terrifying.

Happy or sensual dreams are lovely, because I can recall the feelings later, and I remember every detail. Sometimes, a dream can be so great, I get sad when I realize it was only a dream.

As a crow please explain how you extract worms from a corpse?

The worms I seek are scavengers themselves, feeding on the brown mushrooms that have sprouted from the abdomen of the corpse. They are plump and well-fed which makes me a well-fed crow.

What does the moon mean to you?

The moon is the most beautiful object in the universe.

Questions by
Marie Casey



The Calling Moon

WRITTEN BY K.R. WIELAND

I have never been afraid of wolves. A fact people have told me is foolish, but I can't help it. I like to think it's in my blood. My mother was the same. We lived in a small cottage bordering the woods on the outskirts of a small town which hated us.

There were always wolves in the woods nearby.

My mother and I would sit out on warm evenings and listen for their howls. In the summer months, when the creek would dry up, we would set out large bowls of water for them. They would wander within our line of sight and we would watch them.

There was always something majestic about the way they moved. The howls rising in the night were a lullaby. Whenever the moon was full and bright, they would grow louder. My mother said it was a Calling Moon. It called to those whose spirit matched that of the wolf.

She told me bedtime stories of the moon and how it called to her sometimes.

"It was strange to feel so known by an animal, especially one this wild. I longed to make this moment last."

These memories, so faint in their existence, are what make me unafraid. It is why I bought a house so close to a wood, and why I go for a run each day through trees which remind me of those early childhood memories.

It was why I was running now, pushing myself harder than usual. At first, the noise in the nearby brush startled me, and I assumed it was one of the neighborhood dogs, somehow free of its leash. But it was larger than a dog.

At the trail end, I stopped, chest heaving, but my curiosity got the best of me. I needed to know if the animal would keep pace with me as long as I kept running. It did, picking up speed and slowing down, right along with me.

I tried to take in deep lungfuls of air while remaining still, waiting. The wolf tentatively stepped from the trees, its thick, gray coat appearing recently groomed. Its tongue lolled out as it panted.

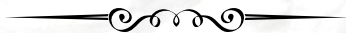
Making my movements slow, I crouched and it took a step back. I remained sitting patiently, and noticed that when I didn't look directly at it, the wolf moved closer. So, I stared off into the brush, gazing at the moss and mushrooms which covered the fallen trees.

I could feel its breath on me and slowly, I turned my head. Its bright blue eyes struck me, so unusual a color. Looking into them, I felt as if I understood it, or maybe it understood me. A deep calm settled into my being, and I relaxed, something I so rarely seem to do.

We watched one another, losing all sense of time, until I could take it no more, and reached my hand towards it. I was gentle as I brushed my fingers through its hair, watching as the wolf closed its eyes. The beast allowed me to continue petting it as we sat in the silence of the woods.

It was strange to feel so known by an animal, especially one this wild. I longed to make this moment last. The wolf leaned towards me as I rested my hand on the ground, burying its nose into my arm before raising its paw. It struck downward, cutting through the tender flesh of my upper arm. Shock and pain overtook all rational thinking and I cried out, flailing as I did so, away from the wolf. I covered my arm with my other hand and looked up, but the gray wolf was gone.

Alone, I stumbled home and cleaned my arm. The rhythmic drips of blood on the bathroom floor made me dizzy, or maybe that was from the loss of so much blood. I wrapped my arm and sank into bed.



Two weeks later, I looked down at my arm, seeing the deep scratches that felt as if they went through more than just a layer of skin. I could feel an ache in the bone.

Carefully, I cleaned the wound which still didn't appear to be healing, and then rinsed it with water, watching as it dripped and splashed to the floor. The sound was faint, but almost melodic, taking me back to that day in the woods. My head felt woozy once more.

Blood no longer seeped from the scratches, but it still looked raw and wicked. Most people

might be concerned at the time it's taking, but I've found that some wounds take longer to heal.

One day bled into another, and yet, I was still alone on my morning runs. I continued to watch the brush for any signs of the wolf and feared I may have scared it away. I longed for its company.

I imagined it was close, because at night, I could hear the howls just as I did when I was a girl. They filled the air, and I found myself stepping out onto my back porch to listen to them as I sipped my tea.

Most of my memories of my mother are gone, lost to time. I was so young when she died, and then was sent so far from home to a family that never wanted me. While I sat out in the night-time air and listened to the wolves she loved, it seemed to bring her back, making me feel less alone.

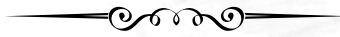
Their calls were still like music, but instead of lulling me to sleep, they built a fire within me. I was consumed by the sound until they stopped, and I wandered as if lost to my own bed.

I was fully aware that I was dreaming as I stood in the woods of my childhood. Taking a deep breath, the scent of the woods and my mother's garden filled my nose. I could sense my mother was near, though I could not see her.

The moon above was full, and I lifted my face to its glory. Nyctophilia had always made it challenging for me in daylight, constantly wishing I could simply live in the calm, quiet hours of night when the moon was the ruler of the sky. It was here, in this dream, when I could forget I was unwanted and alone, left by the family who unwillingly took me in and abandoned by any friends I tried to make. Here, the woodland creatures welcomed me along with the cool breeze that lifted my hair as it glided over my shoulder.

I looked back to the treeline, watching as a wolf stepped out from the depths of the dark. The gray wolf took another step towards me, and in its piercing blue eyes I saw sympathy, an apology of sorts. I wondered if it understood what pain it caused me. I nodded my head slowly, showing my own forgiveness. The wolf copied my movement before coming closer. I braced myself, but it merely brushed against me. A sense of comfort consumed me, a feeling of being home, then the dream ended.

I awoke to my dark room and the feeling of belonging lingered into my waking moment. As I glanced down once more at the deep scratches on my arm, a memory of my mother surfaced. I'd somehow forgotten my mother also carried scars like these on her shoulder blade, though hers were white, healed. The curious thought plagued me until I fell back into slumber.



Nearly a month passed and the wound remained. Any other person would be concerned. I ran a finger down the length of the marks that marred me. There was far more going on than a sore arm.

At night, as the howls rose, there was a feeling in my gut that pulled me from my house. I no longer brought any tea as I wandered outside to listen. I didn't bother with shoes either, and by the time I returned to the warmth of my home, my feet were cold, toes nearly frozen.

Tonight was different. It was not the howls that called, but the moon. I was drawn to it through the window as it shone bright and full. It guided me outside as it glowed, illuminating the yard and appearing to take up most of the sky. I stared at it, unable to take my eyes away from its beauty.

The subtle pain that accompanied the scratches began to flare and burn. I reached over with my other hand to cover them, but it did no good. My arm was an inferno.

Then the fire within me spread.

Spider webbing from my shoulder, the burn began to grow, reaching towards my heart. From there, I felt it pumping throughout my being.

I felt as if I did not fit inside my skin. My bones were pulled, and popped from their sockets. Muscles and sinew stretched, becoming raw and weak. All the while, the fire spread and I became a living torch, falling to the grass on hands and knees.

I don't remember walking into the yard even while I grasped at blades of grass beneath my hands.

My jaw ached with a pain I've never known before. I opened it to try and stretch or scream or cry, but no sound emitted. Something felt different. Elongated and strange.

I lifted my hand, but it was no longer a hand. My feet and hands were now paws, claws protruding from them. My eyes trailed up my forearm to my shoulder, all covered in a thick layer of copper fur.

That's when I heard the howls.

A new feeling rose within me. They were calling, just as the moon called me, bidding me outside to gaze up at its beauty. Whether moments or hours ago, I no longer knew. I longed to answer them. Realizing I was no longer weak, and never would be again.

So, I let loose my own cry to be found by what I never thought to fear.

How long have I yearned for the wolves from my childhood? How long have I waited for a family to call my own?

The gray wolf stood, watching and waiting.

I knew now what the Calling Moon was.

I lifted my voice in answer.

K.R. Wieland

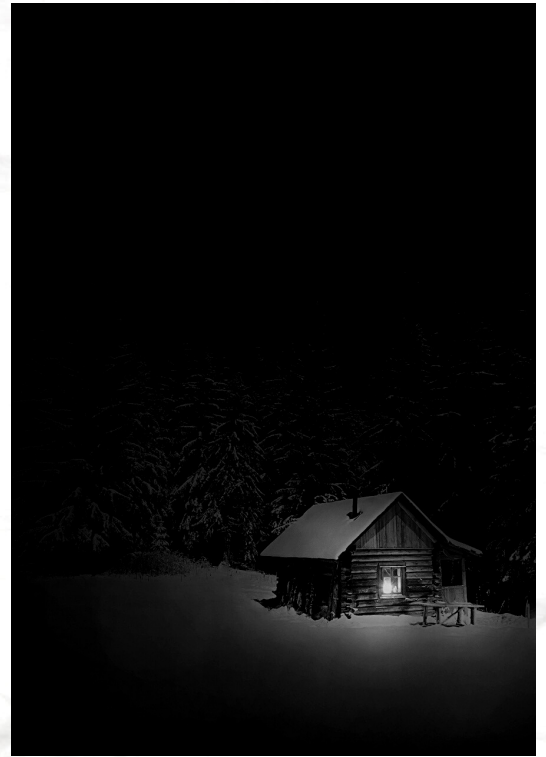


K.R. Wieland has always had an over-abundant love of creating, whether it is with paintbrush, pen, or typing away at her computer. When she is not writing or painting, you can find her at home dancing in the kitchen with her daughters or talking all things nerdy or foodie with her husband. You can read her poetry in *Crow Calls* volumes 1-3 and she hopes to have her own collection out soon.

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The Hungry Whisper of the Wild Bird

WRITTEN BY MARC TIZURA

Paul falls face-first into the snow. His body is a lit match as the fever burns through it. The muscles are racked with pulsing pain, aching when he moves.

"This has to be the flu, right?" Hot bile crawls up his throat, but he swallows it down. His guts rumble in protest and grow quiet.

Then the bile forces its way up. He retches clear, viscous liquid into the snow and pulls away, long strands of saliva hanging from his mouth.

Paul collapses into the snow, trembling but thanking God for the relief it brought, if only temporarily. In a moment of fever-induced delirium, he believes the snow under him is melting from his body heat.

He closes his eyes, praying the dizzy spell passes quickly, rising to his feet with the aid of a tree. The world spins and blurs before him, and he lets out a slow, shuddering breath. When he feels more stable, he opens his eyes. To his horror,

**"Leaves and branches
shake as he passes.
The wind speeds and
chases him. He feels it
on his back, like
vicious fingers ready
to snatch him up."**

the snow he had been lying on melted instantly to his touch. The grass outline of his body stands out like a sore thumb.

He runs his tongue over his teeth, cutting it on a canine. It bleeds, the hot coppery liquid dripping down his throat.

“Mmm, blood, good,” a wicked voice whispers in the wind.

Startled, Paul runs off in a blind panic, gasping for breath with every crunching footstep. Leaves and branches shake as he passes. The wind speeds and chases him. He feels it on his back, like vicious fingers ready to snatch him up. He trips but catches himself. He pushes forward, the wind whipping through branches and knocking down drifts of snow. He dodges. Something cracks loudly. His leg twists as he loses balance, sending him toppling back into the snow.

“No!” he screams.

The wind howls as it passes.

Then the world goes still and silent. Paul pants, rising to his knees before turning his head to cough up more clear mucus. It forms a steaming pile on the snow. He finds his strength after a wave of vertigo washes over him. He gets to his feet, but he is not standing evenly; his right leg seems longer, and he is listing to the left.

With trembling hands, he rolls up his pant leg. His knee and surrounding skin look gnarled. His hip feels wrong too. He pulls his waistband away to examine it; as with his knee, his hip has begun to twist. His heart races, and he whimpers as he leans against a tree. Hot tears stream down his cheeks, others crystalize on his eyelashes. The wind picks up, rustling the bushes.

“You let me in. You were so, so hungry for meat, tasty meat,” the wind says.

“No, no, no!” Paul screams, and his eyes fly open in a panic. He hobbles off blindly as the wind tears after him. The world is a blur as he stumbles away from the horrible voice. Something cracks near his right ear; his shoulder is growing upward. He falls forward, striking his head on a rock.

Darkness swallows his consciousness.

He huddled in a corner of the hunting cabin, shivering from the cold. His knees were drawn close, hands resting at his chest, and a blanket draped over his shoulders.

The fire went out yesterday, and there was no wood left. The snowstorm raged past the windows, and he shook as the chill ran through him, his breath escaping in thick white puffs. Charlie stopped breathing two days ago. Paul glanced at his friend’s body. His stomach grumbled. He looked away, closing his eyes and shaking.

Paul opens his eyes slowly, groggily pushing himself to his knees and teetering. His right shoulder has grown, almost to his ear. He tries to lower it, but it won't budge. He reaches up to where he'd struck his head. There is no blood, but a lump is forming, and it will bruise. He is sure of it. The next step is to examine his shoulder.

He slowly takes off his coat, a lump of hot fear filling his grumbling stomach. He pulls his sweater down. His shoulder looks the same as his hip and knee, but something is wrong. Something is worse... Paul scrambles to roll up his sleeve. A cry of horror escapes him; his elbow has gnarled, the skin around it twisted. He looks at his hands. His index fingers have grown longer than the others.

Paul dry heaves, gasping a couple of times before he vomits more clear, viscous liquid. The wind picks up, fear filling him as he inhales deeply. He scrambles to his feet and runs off on his uneven gait.

His body burns and aches with every step. Sweat pours out of him, his skin flushed red. He tears through the bushes ahead, thorns and branches scratching at his exposed skin. Blood falls onto the snow, the smell of copper filling his nose. His stomach roars in hunger, and he begins to salivate. Drool dribbles down his chin in long streams that fly in the wind as he runs.

"You were hungry, so hungry...no one saw, but we did," the wind whispers.

Twist!

Crack!

Paul lets out a loud cry of anguish as his right leg twists and cracks. His left shoulder soon follows. He stumbles and rolls on the ground. The wind swirls around him, creating a face with sunken eyes with jagged teeth beneath. The face howls as Paul screams.

"You let me in!" the wind shrieks, causing Paul's head to pound and throb.

Darkness consumes Paul's consciousness again.

Paul held his dying cell phone in trembling hands, staring at the little girl laughing on the screen. He cried as he kissed her image, longing to get back to his Emily. He put the phone down and went to Charlie's body, grabbing it by the foot and dragging it to the fireplace. His stomach rumbled as he cried. Why hadn't they paid better attention to the weather? He cursed himself as he grabbed the axe off the wall. The furniture would make good firewood, it was the first rational thought he had in days as he struggled to make up his mind with what must be done.

He looked down at Charlie's body. He was a big guy, fat, he could last for a couple days.

"I am sorry, so, so sorry," Paul cried as he raised the axe to make the first chop.

The wind outside began to howl.

Paul wakes up with a start. He rises to his unsteady feet, which feel wrong, like he is standing on two large, smooth rocks. His head is tucked between his shoulders like a turtle stuck halfway out of its shell.

He lumbers over to a nearby stump and sits down. His body still aches and burns from the fever, and goosebumps pebble his skin. Drenched in sweat, his clothes cling to his body. He unlaces his boots and kicks them off, removing his wool socks. His heart stops. A cry parts his lips; his toes have fused together and white calluses are starting to spread over them.

“Emily, I am sorry, baby. I am sorry. I am coming,” he whispers.

He struggles to breathe, as if the shape of his new form weighs down on his lungs. His skin is twisting and turning a shade of dark gray. He needs to get to the car and see a doctor, that’s what he needs...he needs...food...eat...meat...he needs meat...blood...bloody meat...raw! He raises a hand to his mouth, sucking the blood from the scratches using his newly sharpened teeth to break the skin open again. It is good, so good. He closes his eyes, savoring the taste as he sucks in long draws. Slurping up the life sustaining juice as saliva pours out of his mouth everywhere covering his hand. For a moment he wondered what his fingers would taste like. What meat product? Beef? Chicken? Pork? Fish? He could bite one off and find out maybe the pinkie served no purpose, right? He tears his hand away from his mouth.

The world spins and blurs as he sways. He wheezes as he staggers into the woods.

His head pounds and throbs with every step. He doesn’t feel the cold on the soles of his feet. As his head swims, he tries to see if anything looks familiar. Paul needs to get to the car, to get to Emily. Leaves rustle, and branches rattle as the wind picks up. He sprints to outrun it. The voice. The spirit it possesses.

“But you let that spirit in,” the wind whispers, as if reading his mind.

He sprints faster as it chases him. He feels misshapen but stronger than before.

“Emily,” he thinks.

“Meat, tasty meat, for the feeding, to feed us,” the wind howls.

“They are not food,” Paul snarls.

“No? Well, maybe you can make them eat, invite me in, make more of us,” the wind howls again.

“I won’t!” Paul shouts.

The gust of wind that rips past him sounds like cold, mocking laughter. His chest burns with every step, and his side aches with a stitch. He inhales deeply, his chest cracking and expanding before his breathing eases. His spine stretches, pulling and popping as he grows taller.

His sweater rips and falls away. He lets loose an inhuman scream. His mind races, and Emily is now his only thought.

“Emily, Emily, Emily,” he repeats, panicking.

Paul grabs the side of his head and screams in agony. A pair of antlers erupt from his skull and grow. He pants as he stops to rest against a tree, saliva dripping freely, tears falling.

“Emily...Emily...Emily!” he growls out, panic tearing at him.

The wind envelopes him as cackling fills his ears, a chill runs down his spine with a horrifying realization; the voice that was terrorizing him was coming from his own throat. Blurry, watery images as the gray takes over his skin. The tears freeze causing rapid blinking as the white calluses blacken and hardened into hooves.

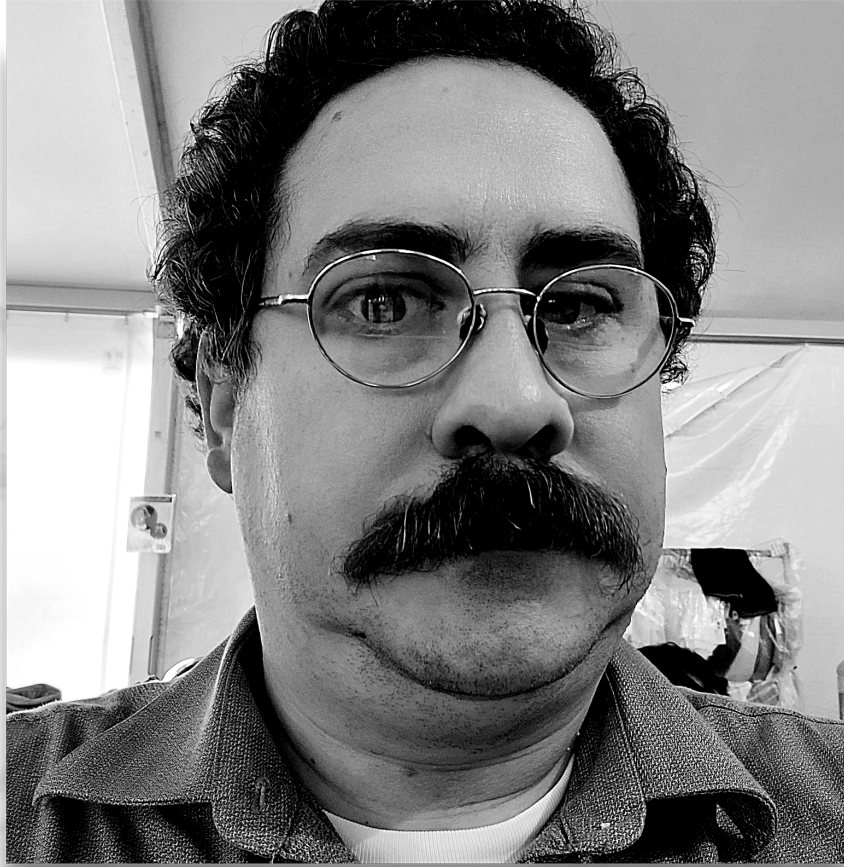
“Emily...Emily...Emily.” He struggles to get the words out.

The echoes of who he used to be: the husband...the father...a brother...a father...a son...a coach...a daddy...a father...father...fa..th...er...beat at his mind as he continues to change. He shrieks as his knees crack and bend inward. Paul is freezing, and a gnawing hunger fills him. With what remains of his rational mind, he realizes that hunger will never leave him. His thoughts fade away, slowly being replaced by the unsustainable hunger and the need to feed.

“Emily!” His final word becomes a howl, and only endless hunger remains.



Marc Tizura



Marc Tizura is a Chicago-based, part-time actor and voice actor, author of short stories in the horror, speculative, fantasy, sci-fi and comedy genres, scriptwriter, YouTuber, paranormal enthusiast, and former ghost hunter with a love of history, mythology and an odd interest in hypnosis.

He is also creator and operator of #tftotw and End of the World Productions Ltd. He voices the Greek God of Death, Thanatos and the crossroads demon Dr. John Lafayette for Rewritten Realms magazine.

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Under Glass

WRITTEN BY HAN ADCOCK

In the Butterfly House, something odd happens to time. Either you speed up, passing through sludgy seconds like a mayfly, or you become the sludge and time is the thing that grows fast.

Maybe it is the heat that affects you so. You bleed tepid sweat, the clothes on your back like another skin. Sluggish as an under-cooked reptile, that is what you are.

Water collects in between the flagstones—some kindly person came in to tend the plants, for it doesn't rain under this glass roof—and I see you watching it rill. You must be thirsty, sweetie. I've observed you meandering in circles for most of the hours after sun-zenith. A few of the larger humans catch sight of you out of the corner of their eyes, their heads turning in something like concern, but this place is so crowded, you lose yourself in the forest of legs before their eyes can pinpoint you. Perhaps you have forgotten where the exit is. That's the funny thing about my

**"I know everything,
every word that is
spoken under the
glass long after the
humans have gone
home. Some flowers
sing and some even
scream to the moon."**

home. It seems so much smaller and less winding from the outside, but that is how I keep myself safe, and my children with me.

You would like a place such as this. There is no danger. The snakes and tarantulas are in the Reptile House, so I am informed, though how venomous spiders are classed as reptiles, I shall never understand.

I watch you stopping to gaze around. Perhaps you are overwhelmed by the plants in the moonlight. That is all right. I remember being so when I first came here, before I understood their ways of speaking. They are large, yes, and heavy, and their smells can be enough to disorientate one, especially one so small. But they aren't dangerous. They drink the earth and feed. We must all feed, mustn't we?

I still remember when the Main Vine found me and grew into my skin, its xylem penetrating my veins, and how we exchanged blood and information. That communion was useful, yes. I know everything, every word that is spoken under the glass long after the humans have gone home. Some flowers sing and some even scream to the moon. However, the communion was painful, and I do not wish such an experience upon someone so young.

It happened when I was a year or two older than you are now, able to speak and make myself understood but too shy and reluctant to approach strangers. So many of my memories have been dulled since that time. With every feeding, parts of the old me leak away and newer, stronger, ancient information takes root deep within me. I had a mother... She had red hair... She liked to sing along to popular songs on the car radio. No father. I remember her dressing me in bright pinks and purples, and sometimes oranges and blues. I *think* I was female then. My class came to this glass structure on a school trip, supervised by a woman in baggy dungarees and large spectacles, and a young man with an alarming thicket of facial hair. I remember the man frightened me. I had never seen a hairy face up close before. There came a point where I was desperate to void my bladder, but I did not dare ask him for help. Instead, I wandered far away from the group of other children in search of a suitable shrub to urinate behind without being noticed and scolded for it. Soon enough, I was lost, with the world on the other side of the glass growing dark. Silence fell, and at last, exhausted, I slept...

I woke to a silver full moon and hundreds of needles entering me... thousands of questing vegetable serpents threading through my veins. Of course, I cried and panicked. I attempted to fight, but movement was far more painful still. Then a warm, reassuring presence bloomed in my brain and spoke to me, easing away the pain. The presence guided me to the warm, secret chamber where the butterfly and moth chrysalises dangled from branches, my feet scudding over the tattered silk fragments left behind by something huge and old—my predecessor. It taught me how to weave the glue fibres that soon spiralled out of my mouth into a sort of hammock, then wrap my trembling form inside it until no light entered. Starved of oxygen, I entered a grey sleep, convinced of my own death, every cell in my body shivering with barely suppressed terror while the Main Vine assured me that it would be all right, and that I would soon wake up in Paradise...

Until I felt the moonlight washing over my organic coffin. Throughout the long months of my slumber, my silken case became a second skin, my nerve endings growing into it, fusing with it, and the moon woke them in an ecstasy of sensation. I burned and burrowed out of my prison—so much larger and wiser and in tune with the Earth than I ever remembered being—and unfolded my cramped wings to dry. My innards tautened with hunger, but the fruit the staff members left out for me was not the sort of sustenance I required.

Days later, a child was separated from his companions, and after much searching, they left for home without him. Curiosity led me to alight on the ground beside him that night, and I smelled the richness of his blood and what he had ingested, both the good and the bad: wheat and bananas, and perhaps a tad too much salt for someone his size. It tasted so much better than fruit. The presence of the Main Vine in my head instructed me in how to wrap him, sequester him away, raise him, and care for him in his new state...

You mustn't meet the fate that I suffered from the Main Vine, though it has its benefits. I can't be doing with the competition for knowledge.

Should I reel you in yet? Do you absolutely need my help? Or will a bigger biped come to take you away? Closing time must be ages past by now.

I never take the big ones, only the small, and I don't hurt them. The larger humans have a scent that repulses me and mine. You would not be able to smell it, for your nose is far too weak, but I can and do. That is a small price to pay for being here, in this sanctuary where nature provides for us and teaches us to evolve.

My children and I keep hidden, but sooner or later, we have to feed.

You are straying nearer to the pond where the turtles are slowly straining to scramble away. Maybe you'd like to pet one? Then you cup your hands and drink. Ah. That is not wise, sweetie.

However, your unwise choice of drink has brought you attention. A climbing vine, woken early by the harvest moon's unusual light, comes questing towards your ear.

If you keep running away, you'll only stray farther. Maybe you think you are hallucinating from drinking turtle-water, or maybe it is heatstroke. I no longer remember what it feels like to have two legs in a forest of tall trees. It may as well be another life I am living.

You dart past a "Keep Out: Maintenance" sign, into a dimly lit corridor where the plants are growing out of control. Sections of the Butterfly House tend to do this at various phases of the moon, until one of the staff members sprays them with some sort of chemical to make them docile. It is not a good idea to go there, sweetie.

A hairy tendril unfurls from a woody-stemmed poison ivy growing close to the flowerbed's edge, a cluster of greenish-yellow berries ripening to purple next to your cheek. You glance over your shoulder, and when you seem sure no one is watching, you open your mouth and accept the offering, grimacing and spitting out most of it, but I worry you've swallowed some. The ivy snakes towards you as you topple to your knees, wrapping itself around you until you are completely cocooned, pulling you off the path, clamping your mouth shut before you have the

opportunity to protest.

You lie in an unnoticed heap beneath a rampant cheese plant, out of sight, out of mind. No one comes into this closed-off section of my domain. I cannot hear you breathing. Did you faint? Perhaps you chose to sleep.

As the last staff member locks up for the night, the main lights flicker out, one by one. No one thinks to check for humans in the closed-off section, and your form is so hidden by the ivy that you look like a mere swelling in the undergrowth. We are swamped in encroaching, UV-tinted darkness. The doors are locked.

I can just see you from my perch at the back of the chrysalis shed. I tear off the remains of my sleeping-chrysalis, damp from long re-use, and flop onto the ground. I wipe sticky fibres from my feelers and pass the silk slugs of my recently adopted children dangling from the rafters, their lives safely trussed and swaddled inside. I pause in the shed's doorway.

I open my grey and brown wings like a blink, move them once, twice. The echo it creates calls my older children to me, and we fly above the leaf-littered pathways, filling the air with our low song.

We think you will like singing with us.

Those of my children who have learned to follow the moonlight find you first. They have paid the closest attention to my lessons. For them, you are easier to spot, fragments of your red, yellow, and orange clothing showing through tiny chinks in your ivy armour. You do not stir as they fly towards you, past the useless table with the fruit rotting on it, and alight on your still form.

I worry you may already be dead, until the first proboscis finds its way in and you cry out, groggy and distressed. I am relieved, then, that I have not come too late.

They only take a little blood. You won't be needing that much blood when we're done.

They've left you alone. There you are, see? That didn't hurt so much, did it? Come here, my brave little grub. We'll take you home and wrap you up safely.

It is a pity, I often think, that children of your kind sometimes don't find the door. But we all have to feed and, when you finally hatch, the night will be yours for the taking.



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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Cross My Heart and Hope to Live

WRITTEN BY JAMIE PERRAULT

The finger in Mal's hand is cool, the skin almost—but not quite—plastic with embalming fluid.

Mal studies the digit, holding it up to eye level and then blowing on it gently. "Sorry, little sib. If I could have managed another way..."

It'd been almost impossible to get even this. Art died in service to their country, and the government has never liked giving up its heroes.

Never mind that the name on the tombstone isn't the one Art chose. Never mind that the obituary used the wrong pronouns over and over and over. The military sent Art to die, and they did as they were supposed to, and now even their body is considered sacred government property.

Mal has always been fast with a knife, though. It hadn't taken her more than fifteen seconds to detach the pinkie finger. Getting the white glove back onto the dead hand took more effort. If they'd allowed Art longer hair, that would have

"Full moons belong to her—belong to the creature that sleeps under her skin, the gift she inherited from her mother and her grandmother and who knows how many people before them."

been Mal's first choice, but she can work with what she's given.

That's what their family has always done, after all. They take the hand they're dealt—the hand that pretty much inevitably means death—and they try to find the spaces between deaths. They try to find the twisting paths that will let them survive, even if they may not thrive.

The night is growing dark, shadows stretching between the trees. The mosquitoes—always hungry—will hopefully become less vicious as the temperature drops and they begin to digest their dusk meal. If they aren't, then Mal will just have to deal with it. At least mosquitoes only bite once, unlike fleas.

The moon will be rising soon. Mal can feel it itching in her blood, urging her to get out of this small three-room house that defined so much of her childhood.

She needs something first.

She needs something she hoped she'd never have to use.

The floorboards creak and shift under her feet, threatening to send her tumbling down to the foundation. How long has it been since someone repaired them? Checked for rot? Surely one of the aunts would have thought to do so. Surely *someone* is taking care of the house that once was their home.

There's no smell of anyone having been here in months, though. No one vaguely *human*, at least. Opossums, raccoons, mice, rats, squirrels, armadillos, skinks, a variety of snakes, at least one fox—everything else is reclaiming this territory that once was theirs.

The bed is still where Mal remembers. The mattress has started to mold, the rising and falling humidity of Alabama nights taking its toll. Mal doesn't need the mattress, though. Just what's under it.

The two hunks of hair are still tied together tightly, merging into one matted snarl; hers, pure black, and Art's, a dark brown that looked black after swimming.

Holding the hair in the same hand as the severed finger, Mal retreats outside. She has everything she needs to try her spell, and the time is fast approaching.

The bonfire she prepared earlier sparks immediately to life, filling the night with motes of ash and flickering light and the hiss of evaporating water. Familiar fragrances suffuse the air, the herb packets and dried flowers that Mal placed between the sticks catching and burning. Yellow and orange flames dazzle her, making it difficult to pick out the stars in the violet and void swirl of the night sky.

She'll still be able to see the moon when it rises. There's no fire in the world that can blot out that bastion of power.

Mal's bones start to ache: a yearning, stretching, all-encompassing sensation that she would normally sink into with gratitude. Full moons belong to her—belong to the creature that sleeps under her skin, the gift she inherited from her mother and her grandmother and who knows how many people before them.

Today, she doesn't strip out of her clothes. She doesn't close her eyes and tip her head back,

waiting for the moonlight to wash away the human skin that's never felt right.

Today, she has other plans for the power, and—moon above, help her—if she succeeds, nothing will ever be the same again.

Looking down at the hair and the finger, watching the way shadows slink and slide over them, Mal draws in three deep breaths and lets them out as quiet sighs. "I'm sorry, Art. I should have fought harder. I should have told you it wasn't worth it. That it was a scam. That they'd never give you enough health care and medals to make up for what they'd put you through."

Mal *had* made those arguments—had screamed at her little sib that signing up was suicide, and that they had everything they needed in each other. When that second part was a blatant lie, though, how could she expect her little sib to believe the first?

Love could buy a lot that money couldn't. It gave them a childhood of happiness, more or less. It gave them a pack and a family and expectations of how the world should work.

But love couldn't stop their mother's cancer. It couldn't keep the aunts from drifting away, one by one, as better opportunities presented themselves. It couldn't give Mal the children she wanted but couldn't have without medical intervention.

Art never wanted to be a warrior, but sometimes the world doesn't give people any good options.

"I'm not going to let them keep you, though. I promise. I'm going to find a way to bring you home." Setting the tokens down carefully at her feet, Mal pulls out her blade—the same one that slipped so easily between the bones of Art's hand and gave her what she needed. "My blood to call my sibling's spirit. My will to hold their ghost. And my power to give them a vessel to replace the one that was lost."

Mal slices deep into her palm, watching the blood well up along the clean cut. Red fills her cupped hand, the liquid shifting between shimmering and black in the flickering firelight.

Once crimson trickles over the edges of her hand, Mal bends down to grab the tokens, dropping them both into the pool. The hair bobs, mats turned to glistening clots. The finger sinks, a slippery eel weight against her palm.

Mal fixes her eyes on the horizon. She can feel the moon edging closer to it. Her bones shake, shiver, start to bend—

And Mal tosses her blood and the soaked tokens into the fire.

Something moves in the trees.

Mal can't see what it is; her eyes are too blinded by the fire, her blood too hot and electric with the need to shift.

A snuffling, huffing sound comes from just behind her shoulder, and Mal stiffens.

"You offer me blood, but it is blood I already claim." The words are not from any human throat nor a wolf's, but at least Mal could convince herself a wolf should sound so deep and threatening.

"It's all I have. All that's mine. My blood, my body...my magic." Mal can feel it pulling at

her still, the moon trying to draw forth something that is being held in stasis—something that is caught between her and the charring human remains in the fire.

“And you’d trade your magic—your proper skin—for an improper one? For someone who couldn’t be bothered to stay?” Claws touch Mal’s nape—the faintest pinpricks—and she can’t tell if it’s blood or sweat that trickles down her back.

“I’d give anything to have Art back. Anything at all.” They’re dangerous words to say—a thousand fairy-tale permutations would have taught her that even if her mother hadn’t. Right now, Mal doesn’t care.

“Anything at all?” The rumbling growl dips lower, resonating in Mal’s abdomen.

Mal almost laughs. Should she make the bargain, trade a first-born child that won’t ever exist for a sibling who still should?

“Not a child.” Hot breath pants against one ear, then a winter-blast breeze against the other as the voice continues, “But blood. All the blood you can draw.”

“Whose blood?” A deep and terrible hunger begins to gnaw at Mal’s stomach—a need for something that she can’t name.

“The blood of those who steal my children and give nothing back. The blood of those who spend others’ lives like pennies in a fountain of wishes. The blood of those who should have paid long ago.” Arms wrap around Mal’s chest, but they aren’t human. They are vines. They are patchwork collections of fur. They are the land around her given form and substance.

“Yes. I can give you that.” It’s a reckless bargain, but what else can Mal lose?

“One a month. One a month to slake your hunger and mine.” A kiss presses against the back of Mal’s neck, teeth scraping—but not breaking—skin. “Now take what you need from the fire.”

Mal doesn’t hesitate. Scrambling forward, she shoves both hands into the fire where the tokens vanished.

It burns. She cries as flames lick against her skin, her tears evaporating even as they escape her eyes, but she doesn’t pull back until she feels something soft against her fingers.

The fox curls in a defensive ball as Mal draws them from the fire. Their fur is the bright orange-red of a flame crackling through brush; their eyes, when they open, are the yellow of a firefly spark.

“Art?” Mal kneels beside the fox, her skin coated with ash but unharmed.

The fox jumps up and yips.

“I thought...” Mal’s words devolve into a whimper as she continues to cry. “When you wanted to run with us, as a kid, you always said you’d be a wolf just like me and Mama.”

The fox’s ears pin back against their head.

“Yeah.” Mal looks down at her empty hands—one palm unmarred, one crossed by a cauterized scar where a wound should be. “You’re right. I’m not the little wolf I was then, either.”

As though the words summoned the change, Mal bends forward, her whole body spasming

as bones shift and muscles realign. Usually it's a swift, painless process, but not tonight.

Not ever again; when Mal stands, the body she wears isn't that of a wolf.

It's something monstrous, hulking and bipedal—not quite bear, not quite wolf, not quite human.

Art leans their slim fox body against her leg, their form trembling with unspoken emotion.

Bending down, Mal gathers the little fox into her arms and holds them tight. She can feel hunger clawing at her insides still, demanding she set about the hunt she agreed to.

She has time, though. She has a whole month before the next full moon. Surely she's allowed to spend at least one night holding the sibling that she's lost and found, both of them wearing forms that don't fit but are all the world will let them have.

Maybe, when the hunt is over, that will change.

More likely, Mal will be as dead as Art is supposed to be, but it will be worth it. Anything that lets her hold her sibling again—even for just a few moments—is worth the steepest price the world can imagine.

After all, that will always be less than the prices other humans ask.



Jamie Perrault



Jamie Perrault is a queer agender veterinarian working and living in the Midwest. They're the proud mother of twins and married to a wonderful genderqueer spouse.

When not writing or reading, they can be found hiking, playing the clarinet, and enjoying tokusatsu shows.

Twitter @awritinghope

A CROW'S
POETRY INTERLUDE

SELENE

Indigo ink

Bleeds through Solaris's
Last goodbyes, as the stars signal
The beginning of another night

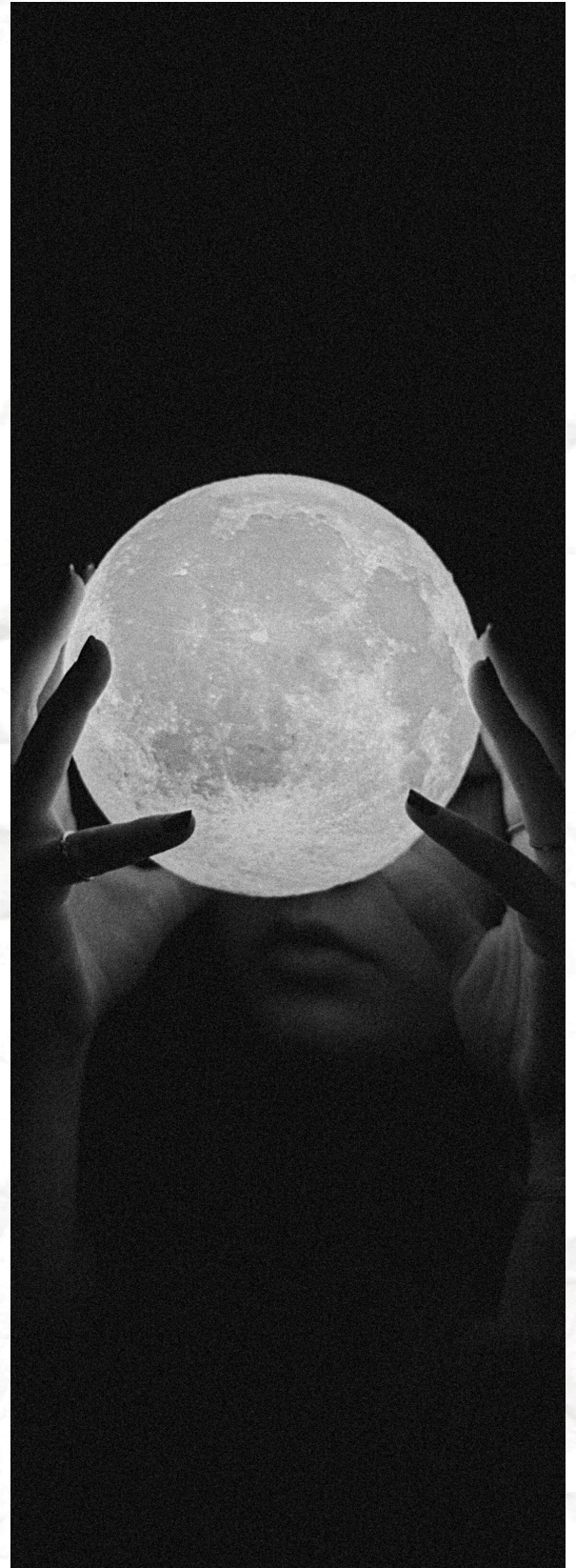
Tethered I watch in rapture
This transformation each eve
In awe my eyes get to capture
Nature's performance
My heart gaining front row seats

How many lovers will come together?
Be torn apart, start families, travel far
Continue life under these Ostara
Symphonies before the main act begins
Lives changed forever, under unnoticed
Lunar winds

Laying in the fields beneath hedgerows
I ponder these individual tales, thoughts
That make my soul ache as I watch the final
Performance of the night, alone in the world
Spiritually caught between the past, present
All that could be

Bun then she rises, my sister, my friend
Shining bright, with masks of astrology's guides
With her enigmatic ways, illuminating great and small
Beautiful moon reminding me that
It's all just phase and perhaps, just perhaps
I'm never truly lonely at all

MELANIE WHITLOCK



Poet Spotlight

THE CROW'S QUILL 
presents

MELANIE WHITLOCK



**As a crow please explain how you extract
worms from a corpse?**

Delicately. Society wastes too much
nowadays. Best to savor each experience.

**What would be etched into your tombstone
and why?**

"I'll find you as the last petals fall from the
bluebells upon this cold stone." He'll know to
come for me again then.

What does the moon mean to you?

Far too much for me to put into words.

I could say that it reminds me it's all just a
phase, or that no matter where I am on earth, my
loved ones are close because we are all under the
same moon, or I could simply say I am never
lonely in its presence.

But truly...nothing encompasses my feelings
for it.

Twitter: @mwhitlock93

Questions by
Marie Casey



In the Pale Moonlight

WRITTEN BY VICTORIA MOXLEY

"It's getting late. How about I just give you my number and we can grab coffee or something?" She suggested with a bit of mirth that didn't reach her azure eyes. As much as her features faked merriment, her eyes lacked any emotion, betraying the soullessness behind the façade. Or was I reading too much into her? It was just, those eyes

were the thing that made me believe that perhaps my 'friends' knew more about me than I realized. Why else would they set us up? Though I doubted they knew my intentions with her. I'd just have to be careful. As I always was.

"Sure. Wouldn't want to keep you out too late. Next time," I quickly agreed. As much as I believed her to be dead inside, perhaps capable of accepting me beyond enjoying my profession, I doubted that she'd be able to stomach the truth of my existence. None had before. Waiting for the one person who could accept it all was a fallacy, one that I didn't even write into my books. I was a pragmatist after all,



"It was nearly a physical sensation, the weight of darkness falling around me. I loved it. Night-time was the best time to hunt."

and I believed in the dark truths of reality. Those were what I penned in the pages which were a physical representation of the macabre expanse of my mind.

Her lithe, chilled fingers slipping a scrap of paper between my tattooed ones pulled me from my thoughts, as if one touch from her could summon all my attention to that angelic face. “Want me to walk you home?” It was an impulsive question, but she’d caught me off guard for a breath and I couldn’t stop the words from falling free of my lips.

Wild, umber locks fell into her face when she shook her head, silently giving her refusal to my offer. No matter, I would still have no issue getting what I needed, and at least we wouldn’t be spotted together after this encounter. A small wave was all I gave as she walked away, turning to take a different direction until I could slip into the shadows. I was good at this; I was smart enough to remain out of sight and careful not to be caught on cameras following her.

It was nearly a physical sensation, the weight of darkness falling around me. I loved it. Night-time was the best time to hunt. The temperature dropped so quickly, a helpful fog began to roll in. Even with the dense fog like clouds falling to the pavement, I managed to keep her within my sights with relative ease. Or so I thought. Was I so lost in my hunger to devour her, to watch her utter destruction, that I managed to let her go? Her sweet scent still hung in the air, but a moment of panic went through me as she was gone from my field of view.

I managed to shove that momentary panic down. Sure, grabbing another unsuspecting person would’ve been simple. But she was special, something I wanted to savor and see if I could fill those dead eyes with fear.

Following her scent, I felt my lips curl into a malicious smile. She wasn’t afraid before, but she would be, as soon as I found her and showed her that I knew far more about the subject matter of my books than I had revealed to her. Though some thought that was why I became what I did, that I let myself go into their world for too long, to get into the minds of killers who had shocked and shaken the world.

There she was. It was in that moment that I saw how others ignored her presence. Even our mutual acquaintances labeled her as a loner, that she rarely wanted to venture out. Apparently, they had been speaking about my work and she’d overheard, making quick friends with them over the topic, but doing little to deepen the connection. She was perfect. No family, no real friends, and seemingly no desire to have lasting connections with anyone. Even in our brief encounter, though she was charming, she felt so closed off to me. Was it just a desire to meet her ‘idol,’ is that why she wanted to have our meeting? It was too brief and casual to call a date by my standards.

A growl nearly escaped as I watched someone else finally pay attention to her. A man. No, she was mine. I’d claimed her, she’d been chosen for *me*. It seemed as though I would just have to make quick work of the gentleman first, then finish hunting my prey. The way he followed her, perhaps ‘gentleman’ wasn’t the right word. I didn’t care to find another as I hastened my

pace, slipping from shadow to shadow as the dark streets emptied. No longer did I care how eerie and peaceful it was becoming, I cared only that someone else would try to take something that was mine. Don't get me wrong, I was not normally a selfish man, I was just accustomed to getting what I wanted. It was perhaps a less than attractive trait, but it was the truth.

They ducked into an alley and for a moment, I questioned why it was she didn't feel herself being followed. I was well hidden, but he was blatant with how he followed her. Staying out of view would be trickier, but I did manage it, following them into the alley. Gratefully, most of the light was gone, shattered and yet to be replaced. I was able to see, but I wondered how the other two would fare. Would she see me coming when it was her turn?

The yelp of pain that came, though quick, was not the one I had expected. I hadn't caused it and it wasn't feminine. Frowning, I stepped closer, my eyes adjusting until I could see them both. She held a knife in her grasp I hadn't noticed on her before, a dark liquid coating it and filling the air with a metallic scent. A soft groan escaped my lips at that scent, and I saw her eyes widen as she turned to face me.

"That wasn't how I expected this to go," I growled out, biting back a laugh at the thud of his twitching corpse hitting the pavement. "When I lost you, did you entice him to follow?" Something about the look on her face made me chuckle. The shrug of her thin shoulders had me struggling not to dissolve into laughter. Perhaps those idiots I had befriended as a cover knew more than I thought. Or perhaps they sensed something in her that was in me as well.

When she came towards me with her blade exposed, I held my hands up and chuckled. "Careful, little mouse, I enjoyed the show, but I have no intention of joining him."

"Mouse? Interesting choice. I thought you would have some big plea of how you could tell my story and that you figured out what I've been doing all along. Something more interesting than calling me a mouse and acting tough." Oh, she was feisty, and I loved it. The question was, which of us was the prey in this scenario?

A shudder went through me, and I couldn't help the wicked grin spreading over my face. "Something more interesting? You should be more careful what you wish for," I growled as the clouds that had been as thick in the sky as the fog on the ground began to part. The glow of the full moon felt nearly blinding in the near pitch black we'd been standing in, but it felt heavenly on my skin. Or perhaps sinful was a better word for that sensation. One moment, I was the proud and cocky true crime writer that she'd supposedly fancied, and the next, she saw the truth that none had been able to accept.

I waited for the fear, the panic, the disgust; something. As I opened my eyes, her grin was as malicious as mine moments before. She said nothing, instead reaching out with her empty hand to run those chilled fingers over claws that I was sure would slice into her skin. For the first time, her eyes weren't dead and empty. I had wanted to fill them with fear but the conflicting emotions of lust and what seemed like a challenge flashed through them. It stunned me, but for the first time in my life, I wondered if I was wrong. Not in what I did. I had amassed enough bodies over the years to care little for the fate of prey. No, I wondered if I

was wrong in thinking that I would be alone for lack of an accepting partner. For years I wondered if I would have to lie and deceive a partner. But this...would this become something that could be a semblance of acceptance? As she reached for me, taking my monstrous clawed hand in hers, I believed it could be.

It was that look in her eyes that made me hesitate, just for a moment, as I realized it was not clear which was the predator, and which was the prey. Was she the real wolf, and I the mouse? Her adoring gaze nearly fooled me as I reached for the knife in her other hand, stopping its swing. I waited for her expression to turn to panic but she just laughed. Neither of us was even thinking about the body feet from us that she'd nearly cut to pieces in the few moments it'd taken me to reach her. And it wasn't her attempt to do the same to me that filled my thoughts, it was a different sort of primal and carnal image filling my mind, and I realized that this woman alone could be the end of me, in ways that no other had ever come close.



Victoria Moxley



Victoria Moxley is a domme, former prison sergeant, and currently a pharmacy tech, who has been writing for the voices in her head since 2000. Most of her writing can be found on various platforms and blogs, and she's currently working on a fantasy Young Adult novel, as well as some dark short story collections, and a zombie apocalypse novel.

She's the scribe of Aphrodite at inthepantheon.com as well. If she's not writing, she's gaming, making graphics/gifs, or building mods to bring the worlds of books and gods to skyrim.

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Murmurations

WRITTEN BY MARY RAJOTTE

At the end of a serpentine path, high in the crooked trees, birds of all kinds—some that chitter and sing, others that mimic and mock—announce my arrival at the cunning woman's cottage. I race to her door, with the setting sun and the impending darkness thereafter hastening my task.

When her gnarled face appears at the glaucous window, I clutch my trembling hands before me, waiting for her to slip from the weatherworn dwelling. Birdsong eddies and swirls in a torrent overhead until she lifts a hand and the creatures cease their chatter.

"What brings you to my door, Nicolas?" The old woman croaks.

"Time has stolen my beloved in a method most cruel." I rub my teary eyes with the heel of my palm. "Will you grant me one more day? An hour? I ask but for a morsel, something to savor for the rest of my days, until Elodie and I are together

**"There is no birdsong
when I wake the next
morning, only the
same chilling
emptiness after my
Elodie left this
world."**

once more.”

“That which you ask will only bring false hope,” she says.

“But my Elodie remains. I sense her in the air, in the coming night. She is not at rest, nor am I.”

When the crone edges closer, studying my face with deepened intent, I fear she will send me away unsatisfied. She clasps her knotted fingers over mine, pulling me near. “That which returns will be but a shadow of what she once was.”

“Even a slight whisper is better than this awful silence without her.”

“Then state your desire and I shall will it.”

“I wish for my Elodie’s touch to soothe me one last time,” I say, choking back tears, “until we meet again.”

With a nod, the old woman lifts her hand, calling with several looping whistles. Overhead, a tiny black-bibbed bird takes flight, circling, before landing on her upturned palm. She cups her fingers around the creature, and when she holds it out to me, its dark eyes study my face.

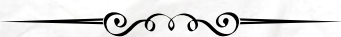
“The easy-spirited sparrow. On this first night of the new moon, allow her to fly free. She will capture that which lingers of your lover’s spirit to console you.”

Cradling the sparrow, I leave the crone to her moss-covered cottage and return to my thatched-roof dwelling with only a shadowy hint of the moon to guide me. The bird, with its soft feathers and the innocence of its tiny heart, is so much like my love. With the creature in my cupped hands, I gaze to the star-studded heavens.

“My beloved wife. The Lord took you too soon. May this sweet natured bird give us each some measure of comfort.”

When I open my hands, the bird ruffles her feathers in a tender caress before flicking her wings and taking flight. She flits from one tree to the next, stopping at my Elodie’s favorite willow. Underneath, her grave—with its simple wooden marker placed only a fortnight ago—lingers in the growing shadows. The sparrow hops about, chattering to herself in as harried a fashion as my love, with her lilting birdsong making it feel for a moment my Elodie is back with me.

When at last I call to her the way the old crone did, the sparrow comes to rest in my hand. Nestling her to my chest, I take her inside to a small nook in the corner. Gathering thin branches from the woodpile at the door, I fashion an area for her to nest. She picks at the berries long enough for me to stroke her velvety feathers, before I pull a length of wicker netting across the nook for protection. I move my chair before the smoky hearth, sinking low to the music of her contented chirps and with her company as my comfort, I weep until I drift asleep.



There is no birdsong when I wake the next morning, only the same chilling emptiness after my Elodie left this world. Staggering from my armchair, I tear away the wicker netting to find the sparrow on her back. Her feet are as still and unmoving as frozen twigs. Her beak is half-open, and her small eyes fixed like tiny beads. I take her in my trembling hands and rush from the cottage, returning through the crooked trees where the old crone waits at the end of the serpentine path.

“Your witchery brought my Elodie to me for but a moment!” I shout, holding the spiritless bird out to her. “Long enough to grant me a sense of hope, only to have it snatched in the cruelest way.”

“Perhaps you failed to let her fly free,” the old woman says, taking the bird and stroking its feathers in her haggard hand. “What can the earth give that it hasn’t already taken?”

Overhead, the birds have gathered again and amongst their tattle and gossip, the beguiling beauty of a throaty melody enchants me. I spin until I spy a chubby brown bird with a grayish belly.

“Elodie’s song. It was as dazzling as this creature’s.”

Nodding, the old woman whistles an undulating trill, beckoning the bird to sit on her shoulder before coaxing her to move to mine.

“The nightingale. The most sweet-sounding of all birds,” she says. “May the tiny sliver of the waxing crescent offer enough light by which to bring your wish to fruition.”

With care, I take this second bird from the old woman, and through the fragrant forest, I return home. Instead of enclosing her as I did the sparrow, I open the small kitchen window and coax her to perch there. I whistle a quick tune, one Elodie hummed when tending to her garden. The bird adopts it right away, singing it tenderly into the evening, a lullaby to which I close my eyes, imagining my beloved has come back to me.

But later in the night, I am awoken by a discordant shriek piercing my dreams. I bolt up from where I sit, slumped in my chair. The nightingale remains where I placed her, but her eyes are wild. Her beak gaping, caterwauling tunelessly.

I leap toward the windowsill. Her screams come in such quick succession that she flails about on the ledge. Her wings flick madly, her beautiful birdsong rising in a jarring crescendo, the notes blurring into one another until she sharply stops, her body seizing until she collapses.

Taking her in my hand, I caress her tiny throat with my thumb. “Please, little one. Please sing my Elodie’s song again.”

But there is music no longer. Only the dull droning of silence and the shushing of her downy feathers as I gather her wings to her body and take her through the woods back to the old crone.

“She sang for a time,” I murmur. “But her song soured and spoiled.”

“Perhaps her song is not your heart’s desire,” the crone says, seizing the tiny bird. “These charms fail because you do not ask for what you wish for most.”

“Her voice,” I say, imploring her with my hands. “If not her touch, nor her song, I yearn to hear Elodie call my name the way she always did so lovingly.”

Instead of singing, the old woman warbles nothing more than jumbled gibberish. Most of the creatures lift away but one, a small dark bird on the branch just above my head.

“What is it you long for the starling to say?” she asks.

Closing my eyes, I imagine Elodie in the lavender fields, the deep purple flowers fragrant and in full bloom all around her. In my mind’s eye, she turns to find me watching her, calling to me with such musicality.

“Nicolas, my love.” I whisper it so softly I’m not even sure my words are audible until the speckled starling chirps and rattles its beak.

“Nnnnicolasss,” it says.

My eyes fling open and I spin toward the bird that somehow sounds just like my Elodie.

“Say that again!”

The bird fluffs its feathers, snapping them and hopping lower. “Nnn-icolas...my love.”

Its voice sends a delicious chill down the back of my neck. I clap my hands together, tears spilling down my cheeks. I coax the bird down from the branch so it sits on my arm and, leaving the old woman, I take the bewitching creature home.

Many nights pass where I lose myself in the starling’s enchanting voice until one evening, I step outside. With my mouth agape and my head tilted skyward, I can’t help but gaze in awe at the moon, full and radiant with her ethereal glow.

“I would give anything to have you back with me, my Elodie.”

From Elodie’s gravesite, a voice hisses its response.

Nnnssssss. Nnnssssss.

Turning for the lantern at my doorstep, I lift it to find a dozen starlings scattered across Elodie’s grave, digging into the dirt.

A black blur whizzes past my head, landing on Elodie’s willow tree. Tiny pinpricks of light flash along the branches and up to the crown where my starling has joined countless others looking down on me.

Ni-co-las. Nicolasss.

They lift off in a disquieting wave, one that blots out the stars and cloaks the sky with the smoothness of a velvet cape. Climbing overhead, they undulate in a noisy congregation, converging in an imposing cloud, before surging toward Elodie’s grave in a flourish. I take off after them and by the time I catch up, they are scattered across the ground. Some shriek and swipe at me with their wings, slicing my hands so I swat them away. Others peck and jab at the grave with their beaks, burrowing into the fresh dirt and brushing it away with their feathers. Having unearthed Elodie’s grave, they attack her simple coffin, rending away slivers of wood until a hint of gauzy fabric peeks through the desecrated grave.

Swinging the lantern, I drive them off. “Get away from her, you damnable creatures!”

Some lift off, flicking their wings to beat me back. Others continue nipping at Elodie,

pulling free the shroud and exposing her lifeless face. Staggering sideways, I kick and spin to scare them away, but they are relentless in their pursuit.

“Nicolas!” the birds respond in unison. “Nicolas, my love.”

I swing my hand through the group to dispel them, grasping a lone starling too slow to escape. I dive atop it, falling to my knees and smothering it with both hands, but even captured, it mocks me.

Nicolas Nicolas Nicolas.

With a terrible slurping and plucking of tendons, I pull my hands apart, ripping the bird’s head from its body and tossing it to the ground. But from its gaping beak, its hideous voice calls to me.

Nicolas Nicolas Nicolas.

Their voices reverberate with mocking whispers that inch down my spine, seizing every muscle with terror. I stagger away, only to have the others stalk me back to my homestead. I barrel inside, slamming the door and barricading it to their battering wings. Outside, they disperse in a plague across the thatched roof where their voices converge into one.

Nicolas Nicolas Nicolas.

“Stop! Please, I beg of you!”

I barricade myself in the corner furthest from the door. Even with my hands clamped over my ears, their dreadful chorus seeps between my fingers, slithering into my head like a curse whispered from beyond the grave.

Nicolas Nicolas Nicolas.

For hours, they hurl my name back at me, an accusatory tone mimicking my love, haunting me with the very thing I thought would save me from this torturous silence. But when the moon fades and the first hint of sunset blushes on the horizon, they fall silent and at last, I breathe easily.

Until there is a tapping, and a pair of black marble eyes peer through the window. A murmuring voice, the one I longed to hear, the one I yearned to have with me for all time.

Nicolas.

Nicolas, my love.



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:

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Deeping Polypore

WRITTEN BY MARIE CASEY

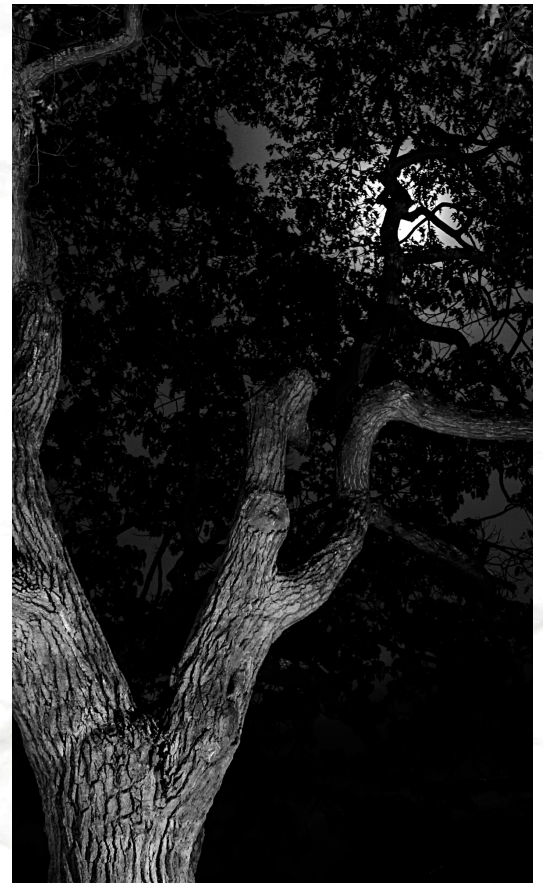
TRIGGER WARNING: IMPLIED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Dr. Fredericks's knuckles whitened, ready to burst at the seams. Bound up with tight shoulders and aching neck muscles, he was often spotted in the hallways trying to stretch away the built-up tension. He swore if he could just get his back loose enough to crack like it used to, it would solve all his problems. But despite his best efforts, his muscles never fully loosened, his back never cracked, and he remained forever strained.

He placed the patient's chart down in front of a group of nurses, pointed and said, "This can't be right."

No one was quick to speak. Eyes wandered and cowarded to the floor. Due to the doctor's infamous reactive temper, the nursing staff was trained to walk on eggshells. Communication had cracked and gone rancid.

"We sent samples down to the lab twice already," a nurse named Judith finally



"I don't know how many times I can say this to you. If you are not treating the roots, then you are likely spray painting the leaves."

responded, stiffening her jaw, bracing for backlash.

“It’s not possible for weeping polypore to grow out of this girl’s nail beds—do you understand?”

Judith nodded in both agreement and discomfort.

“No way? You and Jason?” Rachel yelled loud enough to turn heads.

Juliana shuddered, flushed. “Yes, but is it possible not to tell the whole school, please?”

Giving a two knock warning, Dr. Fredericks burst into the hospital’s medical lab. He presented his chart to a man in thick rimmed glasses. There was no delight carried on his face and he fashioned a slight roll to his eyes. “You are telling me my patient has wild mushrooms growing from her nail beds. You know that’s not possible, right?”

“The chart isn’t saying it is. We analyze samples—that’s what we do. The samples you sent us were found to be of a fungal origin. And thanks to our lab manager’s peculiar interest in mushrooms, it was determined by him to be specifically *inonotus dryadeus*, also known as weeping polypore.”

“No, you don’t understand. This young woman has this incredible and horrendous growth coming out of her nail beds. She can barely use her fingers at all. I’m looking for answers and your lab tells me something that grows on oak trees is growing out of my patient.”

“I understand you perfectly well. Do you understand me?”

Dr. Fredericks snatched back his chart and scowled.

“Would you like to talk to the manager?” He pointed to an office to the left of them.

“No.”

“Okay. Please remember it’s your job to figure out the why. Have you tried asking your patient about it?”

Dr. Fredericks’s face flared, but he directed the rage inward. Swallowing confrontation into his core, into his muscles. He slammed the door on his way out.

“I have to go—he’s outside now!”

“Okay, have fun and be safe!”

Judith shifted her eyes as Dr. Fredericks approached. Heat radiated off his skin and the energy of the room turned sour.

“Were you able to get Juliana to talk to you?”

“My notes are up to date, doctor,” she said instinctually.

He twisted his neck and felt a muscle loosen a bit.

“I know, I saw. I am missing something about this case and I need to know everything. What did she say when she came in?”

“Juliana didn’t say much, doctor. Her mother did all the talking. She said there was some

kind of red oozing, which I guess is to be expected.” They both gave an exaggerated expression. “Her mother said she’s like a completely different person though, like she has transformed somehow. She hasn’t eaten or slept or talked much in a week, whereas she is usually pretty happy and healthy.” Judith paused to catch up with her thoughts. “Juliana did mention her hips and stomach have been hurting. I don’t know if that could be related. She seems quite shy, possibly embarrassed by all this.” She glowed with the flow of her voice.

Dr. Fredericks stared at his chart, scanning, searching for an answer to appear. “Yes, she is likely embarrassed.”

“Wanna get some popcorn?”

“Yeah, that sounds great.” She smiled hard enough to crack teeth.

He entered the patient’s room with another neck stretch, but still no crack. “Hello, Juliana, Mrs. Weatherford. I apologize for having kept you waiting, but I had to run down to the lab to get confirmation on your test results. Unfortunately, it’s the same as the last one and I won’t lie, I’m a bit lost for words. I’ve never witnessed a fungal infection of this magnitude.”

“A fungal infection?” Mrs. Weatherford made a disgusted grimace. “You can’t tell me this is a fungal infection. Look at her hands!”

“Yes, I am afraid so.”

Juliana kept her head down but peeked through her lashes. Her face flat and thoughts unknown. If it was not for her grotesque infection, her presence may not have been noted.

“How have you been holding up?” Dr. Fredericks asked her. “May I take a look at your hands again?”

She shook her head yes and the doctor washed his hands. She spoke so soft, it was almost inaudible. He had to lean in to hear her say, “It keeps growing.”

“Can’t you just cut it off and get rid of it?” Mrs. Weatherford growled. “No one wants to see that.”

“The movie was great.”

“Yeah, I don’t want this night to end.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

Dr. Fredericks stood in the doorway of a trusted colleague. She looked up with her glasses hanging from her nose and said, “Jonathan, come on in.”

“Thank you,” he replied, taking a seat at her desk. He skipped the pleasantries and handed over Juliana’s patient chart. They both knew why he was there; he never appeared unless he needed help.

She read over the chart and pursed her lips. “Interesting case you got here. How or when did this event occur?”

“She said she just woke up with it about a week ago.”

She let out a forceful exhale. “Maybe you need to start there.”

“Even if I do figure out the cause, I don’t see how that will help her now. How do you treat something like this? It’s so embedded in her nail bed that I am afraid I will need a surgical consult to remove it.”

“Jonathan, you are not listening. I don’t know how many times I can say this to you. If you are not treating the roots, then you are likely spray painting the leaves.”

Juliana stared at his hands as he drove, veins pumping, but relaxed over the steering wheel. She picked at her cuticles underneath her coat as they glided into the uncertainty of the night. He gave her the occasional side-eye and bubbles formed in her throat. She choked in silence but it was okay, because tonight, they existed together. Anything was possible.

“Can you come in with me?” Dr. Fredericks asked Judith. Her eyes lit up. She was needed. They entered the room together and focused their attention on Juliana.

Juliana made little effort to lift her head. She was hunched over as if her rib cage was not enough protection for her heart. Her body spoke in their presence, shivered and shook.

Her mother tapped and tapped her foot. She checked her phone over and over again, in and out of her purse.

“You said you woke up with this?”

Juliana nodded.

“When?”

“Saturday.” Her voice ached.

“Okay, so a little less than a week ago. Can you tell us a little more about what you were doing on Friday? Did you go to school or out with your friends, anything unusual?”

Juliana’s entire body froze. She frosted over the entire room and everyone’s breath cooled.

Judith spoke with care. “Honey, in order for us to help you, we need to understand what happened. Can you tell us, what do you remember from that Friday night?” Juliana used the back of her hands to rub her forehead.

“Wait—didn’t you go out with that boy?” Her mother blurted. Her face drained of color. Juliana’s breath quickened and something caliginous grew in her eyes. She lowered her hands, and she lowered her head, and tears streamed onto her lap.

“It’s a full moon tonight—anything could happen,” he said, grabbing her hand. They laid together on the roof off his car, basking in the glow of the moon, waiting for the night to unfold many truths.

“No, no. She is my patient, I will make the call,” he told Judith. “Thank you for your help. I couldn’t have figured that out on my own.”

“You are welcome, doctor.” Judith exited the room.

Dr. Fredericks paced back and forth around his desk phone. There was no comfort to be found in making a call like this, but necessary, nonetheless. He raised his arms above his head and reached for the ceiling. Something popped in his back and he groaned in relief.

He took a seat and dialed. “Yes, hello. I need to make a report.”

Juliana continued to stare at the moon while she disconnected from the Earth. She braced herself, digging her fingernails into an oak tree covered in weeping polypore.



Marie Casey



Marie Casey is a writer and mysterious presence. In her past life, she was a timid, cave-dwelling mouse.

Now she seeks to experience the sunlight in the dream of sharing her thoughts, feelings, and words with the flowers she has admired for years.

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A deep thank you to everyone who submitted a story. Please know how special it is for us that you share your works, regardless of their acceptance.

While your story may not have been chosen for this issue, the themes are ever-changing and next month could be your chance to spin us a dark tale.

If you are interested in seeing your story published in *The Crow's Quill*, please check our website for more details:

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We'd be honoured to have a look.

Are you a poet? Whether you know it or not, but want to show it, please participate in our daily #CrowCalls prompts on Twitter and Instagram—we love reading your poems!

Sincerely, from Quill & Crow's Associate Editors,

Damon Barrett Roe

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