

The Crow's Quill

JUNE 2023

TRAGICOMEDIES

TALES OF GOTHIC DELIGHT

Experience four stories of dark humor and pure dread, of modern fears and classic tragedies.

SNEAK PEEKS

Be the first to peek at our upcoming Gothic anthology of Shakespeare retellings *Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams!*

*Poetry
Interludes*

Please enjoy two specially chosen poems inspired by the Bard himself.

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.



QUILL & CROW
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CONTENT DISCLAIMER

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

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

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

Yours,

**QUILL & CROW
PUBLISHING HOUSE**



ABOUT THE HOUSE

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

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

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

...and we will probably feed you.



QUILL & CROW PUBLISHING HOUSE

Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.

FROM THE EDITOR

Dearest dark hearts,

As some of you may know, we here at *The Crow's Quill* like to match our monthly issues with any upcoming releases by providing sneak peeks and matching magazine themes. As fewer of you may know, our next anthology, *Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams*, is set to be our last.

That makes this issue of the magazine extra special because it's the last time we'll get to provide our amazing readers with exclusive first looks at the short stories we've been honored to publish. It's so very fitting that it all be Shakespearean.

Without further ado, may you cherish what was and rejoice in what will be. Thank you all, from us on the anthology team.

Yours,

Damon Barret Roe

Damon Barret Roe

Assistant Editor

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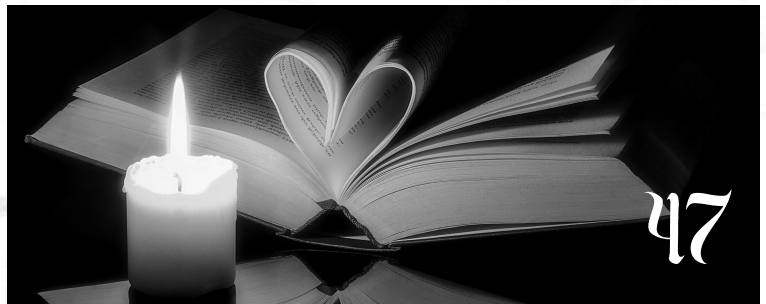
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A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams

Hamlet

“Please,” he says, his voice pained. “I can’t bear this.”


“Oh?” she asks. Her hands relax, creeping through her lover’s hair.

He stiffens, but does not pull away.

“What will happen if you can’t bear it? Will you go mad?”

“Ophelia,” he says, his voice a warning.

She may be mad, but she is not stupid. She slips off his lap and lets her feet carry her out of the room and away.



The conversation, the longest she’s had since she came back, seems to have sapped the life from her. She spends more hours outdoors despite the growing chill in the air. The blossoms have died, but she crushes their yellowed petals in her fist anyway. They smell of dust and the thick, sweet odor of decay. The brook is even colder now than when it took her, but still she dips her toes in. They turn red, then blue, until her brother grabs her under her arms and drags her away, chastising her for getting too close to the thing that nearly killed her.

“Nearly,” she repeats, sleepy with the effort. But with the cold nipping at her feet, she feels strength return to her body. She must rest. There is work to be done.

A Document in Madness
Melissa Brinks

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



Eat His Heart



WRITTEN BY
AMANDA M. BLAKE

After climbing out of the hole, she fell to her knees next to the pile of dirt. Her clothes were stained with unblessed earth. Her skin had taken on the cast of a charwoman, and her matted hair was threaded through with clod and root, as though she were the one disinterred. She did not clasp her hands, nor did she raise her eyes to the heavens. Her cousin was buried on unhallowed ground; there was no one to save her here, nor anywhere.

Once she could move her weary, lead-laden limbs, she lifted her cousin's purloined finger and crossed her own lifeline with her blade. Then, in the welling blood, she soaked hair cut from her cousin's head braided with hers.

She knew not what she was doing, but supplication to a god in his hollow church had yielded nothing; what she had left was desecration of the dead for a devil.

She rubbed her hands together to warm the summons, arranged it on the



**BUT VICTIM WAS NOT
TOO FAR FROM
VILLAIN, AND THERE
WERE NO MORE
HEROES IN THE
WORLD, FOR HERO
WAS GONE.**

ground as though on sodden altar, but still the candlelight flickered only for wind. Choking back angry sobs, though her eyes were dry as dust, she raked her broken nails through the offerings, tilling the upturned soil.

“God and the devil and everything between, I have been told so many years to hold my tongue between smoldering tongs, to no avail, and now will no one hear me?”

“I hear you.”

The figure rose behind the gravestone. Like black mud dripping down its sides, weeds gone to seed draped over its form. A hood covered its face with shadow.

She faced the figure, whatever its origin. “The priest may have exiled my cousin for her suicide, but what killed her was humiliation and ridicule slung by another—impassioned but unproved—speared into the heart of the woman he would have called wife.”

“I care not why you call.” As the figure stepped toward her, its visage became no clearer.

Though she trembled, she curled her fingers in the loam to root herself. “If you do not know what I want, how can you give it to me?”

“I know what you want. Why matters little—only what you are willing to do to have it.”

“My cousin was sentenced for a sin she did not commit. No one will stand for her, with neither sword nor word of any weight or valor—only shock and scorn for unsubstantiated slander. If the men who should have stood have found themselves lacking, then I shall stand steadier in their stead. But I am a woman, ill-equipped to stand.”

“What are you willing to offer me, woman, to stand with you?”

“What more do you need? Is it a woman’s hair that renders her meek? Then I shall offer every strand upon my head.” Her rumped curls fell by bloodstained blade. Her head became as light as her heart was heavy.

“Is it a woman’s dress that binds her with heavy skirts to the earth, a step above the serpent that glides upon its stomach?” Soon, the shape of her legs bent through the tears in the skirt. Her undergarments gleamed moonglow. She was a ghost among headstones and the figure her shadow, standing long and tall over the woman on her knees before it.

“Is it her sensitive skin, or her sensibilities that alight fires under her cheeks and rivers from her eyes? I would remove this paper-thin armor, gouge out my eyes if it

made me fit to play executioner with the same fit of piqued passion as a man.” She scratched her bared arms and legs, calling forth new spells down sunburnt flesh. She carved at her chest above the bodice, as though she could extract what distracted men from her mouth, until her venom injected too deep to ignore. But it was not enough to band herself in red and pretend at more danger than she could offer. It was not enough for her skin to hang from flesh as though she decayed living while Hero decayed dead, innocence forever marred, so sure was the count in his righteousness that he would nearly marry and cruelly bury a woman within a mere handful of days.

A hand black as the night stretched forth from the cloak to still her cuts. The knife fell among worms. “If you can excise all that is woman from you, what need have you of me?”

“That I *were* a man.”

The figure shrugged away his cloak. Underneath, he was as shameless as the devil, of greater stand in his stance than those nobler bred. His was a steed that any soldier would fear to ride—yet she did not shy.

“I shall be man enough for the both of us.” Unmuffled, his voice was deeper than she had dug for a corpse, vibrating like close thunder through bones as shaken as dislodged catacombs.

She rose to meet him, tearing away stray flesh and fabric to fertilize the dirt at her feet. Perhaps something would bloom from her cousin’s demise, although she doubted she would return to water it.

When the devil entered her, she might have cried and might have screamed, but all that mattered in the witching hour, as dishonorable men slept too peaceably, was that she was more man inside now than they.



Whispers preceded her like bees intoxicated by the gossip they confused for nectar. The devil’s weeds were too frayed to completely conceal her grief-torn garments and rage-rent flesh. She had rendered herself almost unrecognizable to those who could not place her without her sting-barbed tongue, for she stepped through the streets silently, leaving footprints of her own free-flowing blood. Regardless of what seed or splinter cut her feet, she felt nothing, neither pain nor pleasure, except for the warm hearth of fury within her.

Her dry-eyed stalking parted the rabble like plague.

The devil kept her steady; she gave him a target.

The count had not fled the town square upon hearing of her approach, although had the count any honor, he would have. However, had he honor, he would not have needed to fear her at all.

Her uncle grabbed at her cloak, but he immediately released her with disgust at the sliminess of the fabric—from the mud of a meaner world, and from whatever had slicked her after the devil had invaded.

“Niece, I know that your grief has turned to ungoverned hatred, bidding you to lash your whip at the nearest soul that offends, but please do not do anything that, upon the rising of a gentler sun, you will regret.”

She crossed her uncle’s path and turned to face her accused, bemused and amused in turns at this other victim of their slander. But victim was not too far from villain, and there were no more heroes in the world, for Hero was gone.

“My uncle is too old to raise a sword, his words too dull with grief. My good friend, who declared love then denied me in his next breath, claims fraternity as a nobler virtue than nobility. The one who would be her husband is the source of scandal and suicide, and his friend, the prince, stands with the slayer. They had not known her a fortnight and called her too well-known. Well, I knew her more than a score, and I have a score to settle with him in her ill-used name.”

She had always been capable of filling a square—with mirth, with matter, and with malice, if necessary.

“I told your uncle that I would not fight him.” The count’s grin was uncertain as he tried to find the joke in the eyes around him. “What makes you think that I would turn from an old man toward a mouse instead?”

She pushed back her hood to startled gasps. “I thought I was a bird, and a bird of my tongue may feast upon a mouse; so we are both mouse-catchers, but at least I use my mouth and not underhanded poison to an outstretched hand promised to me.”

“I will not fight a woman!” The count turned his back on her, although he kept his palm near his scabbard.

“Then if it is your wont, surrender to a woman instead. Either way, I owe you a Hero’s welcome, pound for pound the flesh you took. Draw, on your honor, or call yourself a liar before all to whom you declared Hero a whore.”

The count drew his sword, the prince ready behind him but her good friend uncertain, with the pain of love in the sun-deepened lines of his face. For a moment, she knew regret, but she had no room for it within. It poured out with humorless humor upon the square.

The devil smiled her lips to a cracking edge and spun out of the way of a soldier's blade. From his body, then out of hers, spikes of keratinous flesh darted from her fingers and through her forearms, and she swiped at the count's egregiously clean clothes. Every barb that had sliced her cousin's soul, she marked upon his skin.

"What pact have you made with which devil?" The count stumbled back, seeping from too many wounds, but he could not flee now and save face, although his would hardly end as prettily as it had begun. "Were you a witch all this time, whispering in my Hero's ear to lie with a demon of her own?"

"I could not fight you as a woman. So I come to you a madwoman—a woman's wit with a man's weapons. You have no one to blame but yourself."

The brand of a corpse grin overlaying every gentle memory of Hero's smile compelled her to mar what might make another woman smile at him again. His contempt inspired her to make him unworthy even of pity.

Soon, the boy whimpered on hands and knees like a beast, spitting blood and teeth upon the stone.

"Please, I yield. I did not lie, but I will not speak of it again. I will leave this place. Withdraw your craft from this penitent."

She crouched over him with greater ease than her own power, untouched by a mark not of her own hand. "Because of you, a good lady is dead. You denied her dignity in life; I will deny you dignity in death. You trampled a heart for your pleasure, so I sold my soul to steal yours."

"Peace, I pray," the count begged.

"I do not answer such prayers," she said, in her voice and the devil's.

She stabbed him in the chest, twisting to make him match the sound that her heart had made when she had found her cousin crumpled beneath her bedroom window.

Then she spread the banquet of his ribs to reach his frantic, fickle heart.

He had torn off an angel's wings on holy ground. With a devil inside her, she ate his heart in the marketplace.



The devil cradled her within herself almost tenderly as he carried her out of town like a new husband. She rested, exhausted, silent, but did not sleep, for satisfying her hunger had not satiated her fury like she had thought it would.

"Forever is a long time after vengeance is done," the devil spoke, in her tongue.

"Vengeance was mine," she replied in the same. "Let all others be so avenged."

Amanda M. Blake



Amanda M. Blake is a cat-loving daydreamer and mid-age goth who loves geekery of all sorts, from superheroes to horror movies, urban fantasy to unconventional romance. She's the author of horror titles such as *Nocturne* and *Deep Down*, dark poetry collection *Dead Ends*, and the fairy tale mash-up series, *Thorns*.

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A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams

Othello

“Stop moping around and come to me,” Desdemona commanded in a playful tone. “Don’t make me force you.”

Othello turned to eye Desdemona as she lay on the hay bale. “And how would that be?”

“A single word.”

“You would murder me with a false accusation?” Othello hissed. “How would you explain being here in the first place?”

“Easy—I have riding horses, too: I was concerned for my poor Bianca over there in her stall after this morning’s fiasco with old Saul. I just couldn’t sleep without checking on her. And then”—Desdemona pouted, and sniffed as if to hold back tears—“and then!” She fell from the hay bale to her knees, reaching into the air as if in supplication. “Oh, Daddy!” She prostrated herself on the straw-covered floor, weeping.

Othello’s stomach turned again. “You speak of love, then turn and plot my murder—I am already killed in your mind!”

Desdemona’s crying turned to raucous laughter. Othello had never heard such a sound from his lover. “You see, I have always been the one in charge,” she said. “Whether it be my father, you, or anyone else who thinks they have control, I’ve arranged things so that I will always have the upper hand.”

Othello—An American Tragedy
Cedrick May



DOUBT THOU

Truth may spin lies in its heinous web
And courts crumble under the weight of
The crown that wrings the neck
Brothers may fell their wary kin
But doubt not
The love I've fashioned
Into a weapon

Were you not the stars
That tied my heavens together
Machinating creature of justice
So attuned to my disturbances
Did I not look for thee
In the poisoned shallows before the depths
Did you not hear me cry for thee
While the grave flowers cushioned my steps


'Tis not the end when our desperate bones lie with the worms
Nor our fate to clash blood with fury's strike in turns
To be one with Death or not to be another act

You chose your course and I curtsied in your absence

Doubt I your fire now, doused in my final bed
Where the willow grows askance with all of your promises
May the blade strike true, willed by my dying breath
May you reside eternal with me
In our echoing vengeance

J.A. DUNCAN

A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams

The Tempest

“Thou dost desire a lady’s maid, but sir, I am no maid, and I am no lady,” he had said, standing his ground one hot day when his mother was absent on business of her own.

The duke had laughed but, when Cal persisted, threatened, *“Then I shall work thee like a man.”*

The morning past that next full moon, Cal had returned no longer wearing the tattered dresses Miranda was used to but a rough-spun tunic and breeches. He stood tall and proud, his hair shorn. As the moons passed, his form had shifted from that of a young working woman to the solid leanness of an active young man, and the way he looked at Miranda began to change too.

It was then that her father’s fear had become apparent—when Cal had explained what Miranda’s father and Sycorax would do when the children had been absent. Cal had offered the same to Miranda, content to wait for seasons to rise and fall, greens and oranges shifting with the island’s slow breathing through the passage of years until, and only if, Miranda would allow it. Such permission would have been denied her as a gentlewoman but, since he had become the witch’s son, Cal could not follow his mother. There would need to be a new witch, and a witch made her own rules.

The Winds Did Sing
L. J. Pitney

A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams

Measure for Measure

"I believe *you* have something to offer me."

Her back straightened. She looked at him again, and though he could not see her eyes this time, he felt them questing across the numb terrain of his face, over the hollow cheeks into which his molars bit, to the lips he'd set in a line to keep from trembling.

This isn't my fault, he thought. Anything that happens now. You can't blame me. If you hadn't been what you are. If you hadn't come to me, thinking I was the kind of man who would never do something like this. If you hadn't placed yourself at my feet, I would never have wanted you on your knees.

"We don't believe we understand," said Isabella, in a voice so cold and clear, it was apparent she understood completely.

"I think we'd both rather I didn't have to say it aloud," said Angelo.

Isabella rose, slowly, and leaned across the desk. Her veil pooled in folds on the tabletop, spilling over into Angelo's lap. "You would dare?" she hissed. "You would *dare* importune us in such a manner?"

Angelo stared back at her, gaze-level. The inside of his mouth was completely dry. "Think of it as a formal agreement," he said. "A fair exchange. This doesn't have to be sordid, you know. Not unless you make it that way."

Such Sweet Uncleaness
Amelia Mangan

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



It's Not the End of the World



WRITTEN BY
JACOB STEVEN MOHR

I got wind of Armageddon on a Monday, which seemed about right.

The notification came in first thing. Then I fielded calls from two bosses regarding two different projects; then came my usual 9:30 video call with the creative team. All that time, the email went unread, unopened. But I'd seen the subject line. I knew what was coming.

Urgent: This apocalypse is approved for production.

By 9:50, I opened the email on one monitor. There wasn't much more to it than the heading. *Apocalyptic scenario 161 is approved for immediate production and release. See client changes in the attached document. Need ASAP. L.*

I'd just started on a reply when my phone woke up. L's face flashed onscreen. "Hello?"

"You saw my email?"

"I was in the middle of replying, sir."



**APOCALYPTIC
SCENARIO 161 IS
APPROVED FOR
IMMEDIATE
PRODUCTION AND
RELEASE.**

"Did you send it to Production?"

"Not yet, sir."

"I told the client we'd turn this around fast. Do you have an ETA?"

"I'll have to ask Production. What's our timeline?"

"Did you read my email?"

"I did, sir."

"My email said ASAP."

In my head, I counted down from twenty by twos. "I meant a timeline, sir."

"Is noon realistic?"

"I'll have to ask Production."

"Tell them ASAP."

The line went dead. L wasn't one to stand on ceremony. I put the phone down. In the new reply I'd started, I typed, *L, per our phone conversation—*

My phone buzzed again.

It was C, the creative lead. "Did you see the email from L?"

"I just got off the phone with him."

"Did you send it to Production?"

I moused back my cursor, copying C on the email I'd started to L. That's how that morning, my last morning on planet Earth—everybody's last morning on planet Earth—began.



I took two more calls on the way to the break room for a bagel. Ten minutes later, there was cream cheese in my mustache, and I had the most recent version of the client order up on one screen. It really was the apocalypse: rows and rows of red-lined edits and citations and insertions in different fonts and paragraph styles. I pulled up my previous file and split the screen between them, looking for some kind of through-line. But nothing jumped out.

I picked up my phone, rang for T in Production. "I've got a stinker on my desk L wants a rush put on."

T's sigh was a blast of static. "You got a production order for me?"

"In only the loosest sense."

"Don't sit on it."

"I'm not sitting on it."

"Well, I don't have it in my hand."

"I'm not sitting on it. I'm fixing it."

"What's the matter with it?"

"It's busted. The client busted it."

"It's doomsday, right?"

"That's my understanding."

"So who gives a shit?"

"You do. If I send this down looking like this, you'll shoot me yourself."

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?"

"I just wanted you to know it was coming."

I heard faint chatter in the background. T moved his face away from the receiver to scream something through his office door. The chatter cut off.

"We're blocked up down here already," he said. "What's the deadline?"

"It's the apocalypse."

"What did L say?"

"L said ASAP."

"That doesn't mean anything. Everything's ASAP."

"I know."

"Did you tell that to L?"

"You try telling L. I'll come destroy the world, you come up here and tell L things."

"Don't get mad at me. I'm on your side."

"I know."

"You'll get me the production order?"

"As soon as possible."

"Oh, fuck off."

"Are we still doing lunch tomorrow?"

"If there are still restaurants tomorrow."

The line went dead. T wasn't one to stand on ceremony either.



I spent the next ninety minutes putting out fires. Emails, texts, calls. Voices I didn't know, numbers I'd never seen before. I got stuck on message threads with consultants of consultants; I answered emails requesting other emails; I moved files from one folder to a new folder and renamed them using revised firmwide standards.

Pretty soon I was ready to do real work. Then it was lunch.

A face I didn't recognize appeared at my office door, wearing a puffy zip vest and glasses with no glass in the frames. He could have been twenty-five, he could have been forty. His teeth were perfect; his shave was terrible. He said, "We're going across the street for Chinese. Pick you up something?"

"Maybe. Who are you?"

"I'm C. We're on 161 together."

I blinked at him. "You're not C. I—"

"You're thinking of the old C. He quit."

"Fuck me. When?"

This new younger or older C looked at his watch. "Few days ago."

"Well, what happened?"

"I dunno. I wasn't here for it."

"Well—shit. Are you settled in?"

He smiled a magazine smile. "You want lunch?"

An alert ghosted on my screen, from T. "Can't. Got a rush order from...well, you."

But he was already gone. The empty hall smelled like cheap cologne, then nothing.



"Should I come look at it in your office?"

"No, you don't have to do that."

I was on speakerphone with T, typing two emails on two different monitors. One was a reply to a thread from L about a client, the other was a reply to a thread from a client about L. I glanced at the image of T that appeared on my phone, the one linked to his number. It was the only time I'd ever seen him smile. "I'm just saying—if I could look at what you're looking at..."

"The production order doesn't have all the resources loaded in. You coming to look at it isn't going to fix that. That's a problem for L. Or the client."

"I can't go to L with this. Can we fix it ourselves?"

"Half these links are dead. I mean deader than dead."

"They worked for me this morning."

"That's your problem. Yours, L's, and the goddamn client's."

"I can't go to L."

"The client, then."

"Have you ever talked to one of our clients?"

"Shit, no. They keep me deep in the cave for a reason."

"Well, I'm in the cave below the cave, talking-wise."

T sighed more static into the receiver. "We'll fix it ourselves."

"That's the spirit."

"You want to come sit in?"

I was already packing up my laptop; my phone was cradled against my shoulder. "Be there in five." That time I beat T to the hang-up. I bet it was a photo finish.



From 12:30 to one, I kept leaning over T's chair to look at his monitor, and he kept shooing me back. It got to be like a dance. Each of us thought we were leading. On a glass-top table in the Production suite, my phone rattled like gunfire.

"Hello?"

C's voice, the new C, was tinny, on speakerphone, echoing like off tile or stone. Without preamble, he said, "Are you in your office?"

"I'm with T. Where are you? You sound funny."

"L's looking for you."

"Well, I'm with T. Should I call him?"

"I'd be in my office when L's looking for me. But that's me."

Before the line went dead, I swear I heard a toilet flush.

T looked over his shoulder at me, facing away from three flashing screens. "If you're gonna get screamed at, do it somewhere else."

"You mean back in my office?"

"Somewhere else. Anywhere else."

"You think I'm gonna get screamed at?" T shrugged and said nothing. I pointed to the monitors. "Are we in good shape here?"

"What timeline did you give the client?"

"L told them noon."

T's face turned towards the analog clock on the wall, then towards me. His face was a sagging mask; his eyes were shallow, lightless caves. "Then no. We're not in good shape here."

I looked around the windowless studio. "You should turn some lights on. A lamp."

"Fuck you," said T.



Two calls to L—straight to voicemail.

Back in my office, I answered emails from work and texts from friends. I opened up a project from two weeks ago and stared at it for a while. I rewrote my corporate email signature once, then twice, then reverted it to the original version. I got down on my hands and knees on the stress-rug I'd brought from home and banged out a dozen pushups. Mostly, I tried not to stare at the open door or listen for footsteps coming down the hall.

Forty minutes slithered by on their stomachs; I thought I was in the clear.

Then L burst through my office door. "Your cell phone turned on?"

I peered at it, face up on my desk. "Yes, sir."

"Does it get calls? Does it get emails?"

I straightened a little. "Yes, sir."

"Does it tell time?"

"Yes, sir, it does."

"I called you four times in the last hour and a half."

I shut my mouth over my answer. L's face was pink across the forehead.

"Well?" he asked.

"C said you were looking for me."

"Did you get that scenario produced like I asked?"

"T's working on it, sir."

L nodded slowly, with his lips pushed tight together. "Well—how close are we to done?"

"We're close. We should be close."

"I told the client noon. I asked you if that was realistic."

"Yes, sir. I said I'd have to ask Production."

"Did you tell them I said noon?"

"We're close, sir. We'll get it done."

"Don't fucking bullshit me."

I counted down from thirty by threes. I pictured bombs dropping. I pictured storm winds whipping shingles off rooftops. I pictured floods rushing between skyscrapers or bubbling up around shopping centers. I pictured a red light growing in the distance, getting brighter and brighter until it consumed everything. Then I

said, "I'm not, sir. I wouldn't."

"Now I have to call the client back. I'm going to look like a dumbass."

"We'll get it done, sir."

"Don't bullshit me."

I didn't answer.

L massaged his cheek. "Turn your fucking phone on," he said.

Then I heard his sneakers squeak down the hall. Somewhere in the distance, a door slammed hard enough to rattle picture frames on the wall. I was alone in the building.



T got it done on his own somehow. Two calls to him went to voicemail—then around 4, I got an email with a link to a report: *For your review. Apocalyptic scenario 161 produced and ready to ship. All client changes accounted for.*

I pasted the link into a new email to L, copied C, and hit Send. I got an immediate *thanks man* from C—all lowercase letters, no punctuation. *Sent from my iPhone.* Nothing from L.

From 4 to 5, I listened to the office make noise. The printer turned on, ground its teeth, then switched off. Something ticked inside the walls. Then there was quiet.

I closed my laptop and slipped it into its carrying case, turned off my office light, and locked the building with my four-digit code. It was winter, and the sun was gone. There was some red on the horizon but no more than that. My car was one of three in the lot. A streetlight stared down; everything else was black emptiness.

Halfway to my car, my phone buzzed. I let it ring. It could have been L, but it could have been anybody. The red on the horizon spread, getting brighter and bigger—or just closer. I could feel it pushing back the cold. It started to burn against my skin. My phone rattled once more, then stopped altogether. I reached up and loosened my tie.

The world counted with me, back from ten.



Jacob Steven Mohr




Don't buy the hype: Jacob Steven Mohr was not raised by wolves. Feral children are capable of many things, but weaving wild words into flesh and fantasy isn't one of them. Lucky us. If it were, we'd all be speaking Wolf.

Mohr's work has previously appeared in Cosmic Horror Monthly, Shortwave Magazine, Chthonic Matter, and Story Unlikely, as well as featured on The NoSleep Podcast and Scare You To Sleep. He writes out of Columbus, Ohio.

Twitter & Instagram: @jacobstevenmohr

A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams Much Ado About Nothing

“Tell me,” he said, “for which of my foul parts do you love me?”

Beatrice hesitated, warring with her first inclination, which was to deny her love outright. She looked long at his face and beyond to the stained glass that shone faintly through it. She smiled and answered, “For all of them together do I suffer love for you.”

“Suffer love; a good epithet,” he said wryly. “I suffer in love, too. I suffer the more to see you marry another.” A dark emotion flashed across Benedick’s face and his hand grew colder on Beatrice’s wrist.

“I suffer to do it,” she confessed. “But I have little choice.”

“Unite yourself with me.”

Beatrice laughed, without thinking otherwise. There was, however, no mirth in Benedick’s ghostly face. “I wish daily that I could. But you are dead, and I live. Death parts even those who married in life; the opportunity for our union has passed.”

“It may be that we can’t marry,” he acknowledged. “But we may still be joined as one.”

She withdrew her hand from his cold grip, brow furrowed. “Unless you can live again and find me here before two days pass,” she said, “I must live the rest of my life with Don Pedro.”

The Marriage of Beatrice Messina
Emma Selle

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



We Need to Discuss Agenda Item 6b



**WRITTEN BY
REBECCA CUTHBERT**

*Recorded and transcribed by Pam Sanchez,
English dept. secretary, August 23, 2023, English
Department Faculty Lounge and Meeting Room*

Faculty Members Present:

**Dr. Wilson (dept. chair, Brit Lit, Shakespearean
Lit)**

Dr. Lipinski (Arthurian Lit, Chaucer)

Professor Morgan (union rep, American Lit)

Dr. Ahmad (World Lit, Contemporary Drama, Screenwriting)

Professor Romero (Film & Lit, capt. of faculty ultimate frisbee team)

Professor Greene (English Ed, Adolescent Lit)

Professor Kirst (Genre Lit, Digital Writing)

Dr. Steiner (Victorian Lit, Major Authors)

Dr. Saunders (Writing for the Professions, African American Lit)

Four new faculty members (names unknown)



**I'M OFFERING YOU
THE OPPORTUNITY
TO SPORT THESE
TRENDY AND
INNOVATIVE
TITANIUM FOREARM
REINFORCEMENT
SLEEVES, OR *TFRS*.**

10:02: Meeting opens

Dr. Wilson: Alright, everyone! I hope your summers were enjoyable and you're revved up for another great semester here at Hepwell! I know we're all excited about the months of scholarship to come, but let's settle in so we can get through the agenda before our noon break, when FSA will be providing us with a cheese and fruit platter. Yum! Now, does everyone have a copy? Item one—

Dr. Lipinski: Dr. Wilson, are we really not going to address the folks in the back of the room first? I mean, come on, no one here has failed to—

Dr. Wilson: Of course we will! See line 6b. Let's go in order though, hmm? Now then, item one, please. Old business.

Professor Morgan: I agree with Lipinski; I really think we need—

Dr. Wilson: As I said, in time. Item one. The summer phone-a-thon brought in twelve new English majors and two English Ed majors, so brava, volunteers! You did a wonderful job talking up our programs here at Hepwell! I overheard several of you mentioning our new vending machines, as well as our—

Professor Morgan: Look, Dr. Wilson, I respect procedure, but I think we need to discuss agenda item 6b now.

Dr. Ahmad: Yes! And can we address the smell? At least open a window!

Dr. Wilson: No need to be rude, Dr. Ahmad! Also, please remember this room is temperature-controlled and we do not have access to the thermostat nor do we have administrative permission to open windows. If necessary, we can discuss asking for those stipulations to change at our next department meeting. For now, breathe shallowly.

[Individuals in back of room groan]

Professor Morgan: We have the right to a vote! You know we do. Everyone, show of hands for dealing with item 6b now.

[Professor Greene abstains; seven votes for proposal; Dr. Wilson votes against proposal; individuals in back of room raise hands for all three options]

Dr. Wilson: Discussing agenda items out of order is unorthodox, but you win. And we do need to think creatively in this challenging academic climate. So, unorthodox it is. Item 6b. As you all know, retention and enrollment have been down for years, and the majority of incoming freshmen are going with the hard sciences or that one major that's basically gym. I forget the name. In short, department chairs have been tasked with finding ways to save money while still

offering the quality education that all Hepwell University students hope for. And, I'm happy to share that we've risen to the challenge!

[More groans from individuals in back of room]

Excellent! We're thrilled to have you with us, and we appreciate your enthusiasm. Stand up and come forward, would you? Everyone, give a warm Hepwell welcome to your new colleagues!

[Dr. Wilson claps]

Dr. Ahmad: What the actual f***.

Professor Morgan: Jesus H. Christ.

Professor Greene: You've gotta be f***** kidding me.

Professor Kirst: Are those f***** zombies?

Dr. Wilson: Yes, while the colloquial term is 'zombie,' the correct and respectful term that we will use at this institution is 'post-living adjunct faculty member.' Notice I said post-living, not post-thriving, right, folks?

[Groans from living faculty members]

Yes! Because of the willingness of our four new post-living adjunct faculty members to teach all English 100, Introduction to Creative Writing, and Women in Literature classes, we've been able to release our former adjuncts from their obligations.

Professor Romero: So you fired them?

Dr. Wilson: Professor Romero, you know as well as I that adjuncts aren't fired—goodness, what a negative connotation! We simply chose not to renew their employment. And, speaking of, there's more great news: by reducing employee paperwork and thus the labor hours required to digitize and file it, Marcia, the secretary in Human Resources, will finally be able to get that knee surgery she's been waiting on all these years! Isn't that wonderful?

[Dr. Wilson claps]

Dr. Lipinski: This is ridiculous, Dr. Wilson! Zombies can't teach college courses! Can they even spell? Look at that one! He's eating his own finger, for godsakes. He's already past the first knuckle!

Dr. Wilson: Dr. Lipinski, this administration is committed to serving our current and future students to the best of our budget's ability. To that end, the post-living adjunct faculty members are part of the new and forward-thinking, right-sizing initiative here at Hepwell. By employing the bare minimum of faculty members necessary to retain our accreditation, we know we're maximizing the

department's budget dollars. Our new post-living adjunct faculty members will attend classes, click through pre-made PowerPoint slides, and collect tickets at Commencement while proudly wearing Hepwell sweatshirts. Everything our adjuncts have always done!

Professor Kirst: But they're f***** zombies!

[All faculty members talk at once; unable to transcribe]

Dr. Wilson: Hey now! Remember we're all on the same side—us living tenured faculty members and our fresh new post-living adjunct faculty members. We're all committed to our students and the quality—

Professor Kirst: Fresh? They're rotting corpses! They're f***** dead!

Dr. Wilson: Please use appropriately respectful terminology, Professor Kirst. They are post-living.

Professor Morgan: Jesus H. Christ. Adjuncts do more than show up and press buttons, Dr. Wilson! This is an egregious breach of administrative power—

[Groaning from post-living adjunct faculty members]

—and this never would have happened if Dr. Steiner were still chair.

Professor Greene: That's right!

Professor Morgan: Shut up, Greene. I know you were part of the faction that voted him out!

Dr. Steiner: I appreciate your faith in me, Morgan. Very collegial. But Dr. Wilson is at the helm now. Let's do what we can to support her.

Professor Kirst: They're f***** dead!

Professor Morgan: Jesus H. Pissing Farting F***** Christ.

Dr. Wilson: Let's all just sit down and take a breath. We'll get through our agenda and then we can chat about logistics over a light collegial luncheon of cheese and fruit, kindly provided by FSA. Now. In the email attachment I sent last week, you can see the budget numbers for yourself—everyone opened that attachment, right? And printed it out? And brought it with them? The one that came with the email marked 'please open' in the subject line?

[Living faculty members groan]

Dr. Wilson: Well. No worries. I'll pull it up on the projector.

[Dr. Wilson turns projector on]

There we go. Have a look at column A; that's what the adjuncts cost us during the last academic year. Wow! We were spending \$24,000 per annum on them. Each! Can you believe it? And we had eight adjuncts—there was Todd, Jesse, Dwayne,

Christi—or was it Christine? Crystal? And then we had... Well, there were others, I know that. And look! In total, adjuncts were costing us over \$192,000 a year! A year! And I think we can all agree that that portion of our budget can be better used elsewhere.

Dr. Ahmad: So, um, what are you paying them?

Dr. Wilson: Pardon?

Dr. Ahmad: The zom—um. The former—

Dr. Wilson: Post.

Dr. Ahmad: The post-living adjunct faculty members. What are you paying them?

Dr. Wilson: I'm so glad you asked! As part of our right-sizing initiative, we've implemented a bartering system between departments. It all gets rather complicated, and I don't have the flowchart handy, but for our part, we'll give History our coffee budget and extra paperclips for the last week of every month, and Biology will save all the expired laboratory test subjects' remains so that we may pay our post-living adjunct faculty members in fortifying nourishment.

Professor Kirst: The one in the red tie just tried to bite me!

[Professor Kirst crosses to other side of room]

Dr. Wilson: Ah, yes. Thank you, Professor Kirst, for bringing us back to the agenda. My, time flies when you're having fun! Okay, we're still not quite going in order, but if you look at 7a, you'll see safety measures. That's very important; we must remain OSHA compliant.

Dr. Steiner: Hear, hear! Safety first.

Dr. Wilson: Exactly. Thank you, Dr. Steiner. We have a set of guidelines we will follow from this point hence. We've re-directed some of our budget that was freed up by not renewing the employment of our former adjuncts to purchase enough personal protective equipment for all our living tenured faculty members!

[Dr. Wilson claps]

Professor Morgan, would you help me with this box?

[Professor Morgan lifts box onto table; Dr. Wilson opens it]

Professor Kirst: Is that f***** chainmail?

Dr. Wilson: Another outdated term. We must keep pace with our ever-changing lexicon. These are titanium forearm reinforcement sleeves, or TFRS. You simply slide these over your arms anytime you're in the building to avoid accidents related to overly exuberant collegial overtures by our new post-living adjunct faculty members.

I ordered half in what the manufacturer calls burnt umber, half in platinum, so everyone can pick the color they want, in order of seniority. For instance, I'm an autumn, so I'll take a pair of the burnt umber.

Professor Kirst: You want us to wear f***** chainmail?

Dr. Wilson: No—I'm offering you the opportunity to sport these trendy and innovative titanium forearm reinforcement sleeves, or TFRS. They fit over any type of fabric sleeve, so they're practical in summer and winter! What a treat.

Dr. Ahmad: Um. What do we do if they try to bite us anywhere else? Like, our necks or heads or ears or faces or backs or legs or knees or ankles or hands or feet?

Dr. Wilson: That's what's so great about these! You can use them to block overly exuberant collegial overtures from our post-living adjunct faculty members from any angle. Simply lift your arm, safe in its TFRS, to shield your other body parts! These truly give us the most protection for the least amount of money.

[Dr. Wilson claps; groans from post-living faculty members; Professor Greene weeps; Professor Kirst leaves]

Dr. Steiner: I, for one, am still a team player, and haven't forgotten the days when I myself was an eager new faculty member, looking to make a difference in the lives of our students.

[Dr. Steiner stands, approaches post-living adjunct faculty members, extends hand]

Hello, fellows. It's great to meet you.

Dr. Wilson: Thank you, Dr. St—

[Dr. Steiner is bitten, screams; Professor Morgan and Dr. Ahmad scream; Professor Romero laughs]

Grab your TFRS! Quick! Put them on!

[Post-living adjunct faculty members advance; Professor Morgan and Dr. Saunders climb out window]

Dr. Steiner: Help! Help me! It's got my hand, it's got my—

[Professor Romero laughs]

Professor Greene: We need to get out of here!

[Post-living adjunct faculty members groan, advance]

Dr. Wilson: Run!

[Professor Greene exits; Professor Romero climbs onto table; Dr. Ahmad follows Professor Greene]

He's f***** eating me! Oh God, he's eating me!

[Post-living adjunct faculty member takes bites of Dr. Wilson's torso; another post-living adjunct faculty member eats Dr. Steiner up to his shoulder]

Dr. Steiner: No! No!

Dr. Wilson: Help! Someone! For the love of—

[Remaining post-living adjunct faculty members descend; remaining living tenured faculty members exit via door and window; dept. secretary (I, Pam Sanchez) stops recording as no one is speaking/likely to speak as they are eating/getting eaten; dept. secretary retrieves meeting agenda, powers down projector, makes note to report blood stains to custodial staff; exits via nearest window]

10:31: Meeting terminates



Rebecca Cuthbert



Rebecca Cuthbert is the author of **IN MEMORY OF EXOSKELETONS**, a dark poetry collection published by Alien Buddha Press. Forthcoming publications include the collection **SELF-MADE MONSTERS** (Alien Buddha Press, 2024); the sonnet "No Rest Nor Relief For You With Me Dead" (**SHAKESPEARE UNLEASHED**, Monstrous Books and Crystal Lake Publishing); the story "The Quilting Circle of Bygone Gardens" (**SOUL SCREAM**, Seamus & Nunzio Productions); and "In Crowd" (**THE START**, Rebellion Lit), among others.

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A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams

The Two Gentlemen of Verona

“I wonder...” She hesitated, glancing back at the sundial.

“Speak,” Julia said, offering a wry smile. “You can say nothing slanderous about my husband which I have not thought myself.”

Silvia’s lips quirked, then the humor drained from her expression. She laid a hand on Julia’s arm. “I wonder how far the distance is from wishing your friends dead, to making them so.”

Cold fear traced the curve of Julia’s spine, running down her back like a lover’s touch. If Silvia was of a similar mind, perhaps her own suspicions were truly sound. Perhaps her fears had come not from imagination, but from insight.

“Proteus has made plans,” Julia whispered, “to journey to Mantua—the two of us, alone.”

Silvia’s breath caught. “Then if he does wish you dead—”

“It will be the perfect time to kill me.” Julia nodded. She had indeed read him true.

The very evening Proteus had first met Margaret, Julia had found him on his way out of the stables, on the point of hanging a heavy rope on a hook. They had made eye contact, then his gaze had dropped to the braided rope in his hands.

We, Unhappy
Sabrina Howard

A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams

Romeo and Juliet

I could, I suppose, have let go of the thirst that consumed me.

Yet my dreams were filled with death—seeing my father trampled, of seeing the old Prince’s indifferent face as the light of the rose window struck him, a holy mockery. Unholy fool! I would wake and rise and stalk the cloisters of the abbey, my eyes darting this way and that, seeing things unseen by day, shadows which moved and writhed before my sight. The shadows did not always talk, but they always reminded me of what I had lost.

Shuffling through the cold, stone halls, I held to my contempt.

And the plan began to form.

Even now, as you, one or both, read this, ‘Lords’ Capulet and Montague, you cannot guess of the depths—yes, the depths!—to which I was willing to plunge myself. The nighttime walks were lonely, isolating, and made me feel as though I was the last man upon the earth, a pathetic soul with only my memories and the shades of my dead and rotting family to accompany me from one dark corridor to the next.

I wandered—yes—I wandered! Aimless.

But not without result. For these walks caused me to ruminate, to enter deep reveries in search of some plan, some manner by which I might destroy Capulet, Montague, and all of Verona if I could.

To Make the Devil's Blood Run Cold
Matthew L Reyes



THE POET'S LEGACY

Beseech me, my love, for what I am about to do.
Tender stirrings, my swollen belly doth remind
Of the seed you planted within
On our night so nuanced with lust's velvet tongue,
Your promise of fidelity sealed by droplets of blood,
Vermillion untruths smeared from your mouth of maggot-charm,
Love's cruellest lies, wrapped in chiffon,
Whispered with gifted guile of the playboy poet that is you.
Ah, you think yourself cloaked, I do not see
Your dalliances of deceit,
Spilling pestilence into maidens pure.
Yet, as you lay beside me, your breath in sweet repose,
A peaceful beast, soothed by my lullaby of hemlock and hope,
I falter and doubt the intention inside.
Is it my fault as you say, that doth force you to stray
From my bosom of piety and pledge?
It is too late. You breathe your last.
Forked tongue and horned desires quelled.
I brush my lips to Death's requiem kiss,
Your parting stanza... this.

TESS P.

A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams

Titus Andronicus

The fire is roaring now. Bright and hot.

I remember the pie cooling on the sill. My hands in the leaves. Tree branches. Birch. Poplar. A river of blood in my throat. The Tiber. The Thames.

Now it is ink I dribble from my lips. I rose this morning not intending to become a historian by sundown; but now, how can I possibly be quiet? A lady does not need a tongue to speak, nor hands to write with. I have met my share of women who can do naught but wag with the one and quibble with the other. But I must be brief, else my head fall from my shoulders from too much dotting of my I's and gnashing at my T's. The quill my chin does steer bears a foul odor and, I can imagine, a still fouler taste. There are times, no doubt, it serves to want a tongue.

A hand on my throat. Tree branches. Poplar. My hands in the leaves. Oak. My hands in the earth.

Winter came to my father's estate this Hallowtide's eve in the form of two boys, whose names were of this morning only faintly familiar to me, and whose faces shall be but remembrances now. Dead are they, as doornails driven home.

Lend Me Thy Hand
William Steffen

THE CROW'S QUILL
presents



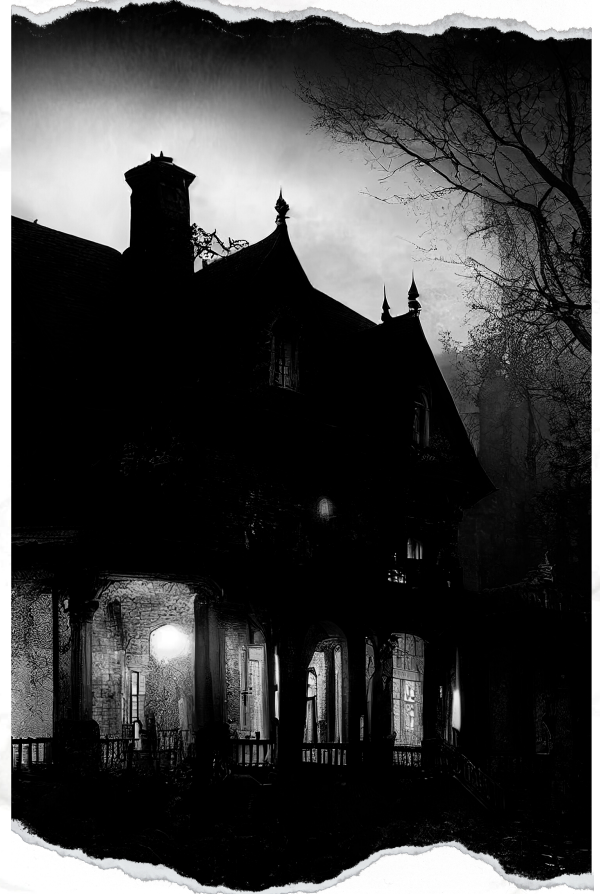
Crestfall



WRITTEN BY
MASON McDONALD

I was sitting on the stone porch behind the manor, its obsidian black walls standing strong, the setting sun bouncing off the dusty window panes. Moss and other vinery hung from it like loose veins, plucked and torn from its flesh and left to dry in the summer air. The sky was the purple of dying lips, of held breath, of blood behind skin stretched taut and thin. The clouds were orange and red as the sun fell closer and closer to the trees that circled Crestfall Manor and the sea that touched the horizon. Soon the sun would set completely and we would be in darkness again.

To be in the shadows of the manor when night fell would, under normal circumstances, be a fate worse than death. This place had teeth, fangs even, and once it sank them into your flesh, it would never let go. Eyes in the woods, footsteps in the halls, and the thing that lived in the well with a name no man could pronounce, these were common on the grounds. These, and more.



**SOME TOLD STORIES
ABOUT FOOTSTEPS
IN THE NIGHT,
FOLLOWING THEM
HOME TO THEIR
DOORS.**

My first time there had almost been my last. In a way, I wish it had been.

Vignar finished carrying out the last corpse to the foot of the steps in front of me. Like the others, he had wrapped it in a bedsheet and tied twine around the ankles, waist, chest, and forehead. It was much smaller than the rest.

There were seven in total. Seven bodies wrapped like butchers' specials. Seven spent things washed up at the shores of Crestfall like beached whales. Red flowers bloomed in the white sheets and blossomed into vermillion petals with varicose stems that twisted through the cloth.

"That's the last of them," Vignar said with a deep, exhausted breath, taking a swig from his leather canteen.

"Aye," I said and continued watching the sun sink lower. It touched the tips of the silhouetted pines and would soon pass them completely. From the top of the steps, I saw the slice of blue sea cut across the sky and sever it. When I was a boy, I once thought the sea was alive. That the water was its blood and somebody had to plug the leak. I was a boy, and I was thick, but there was a point to be made—the water was the blood, yes, but the world was what bled.

Vignar was quiet as he reached into his bag and pulled out a bottle. It was a deep, stained brown and the label had long since withered away from moisture and travel. He grunted as he popped the wedged cork. In an instant, the air smelled of fruit and honey and I inhaled it deeply, savoring it. Vignar took a large swig and held the bottle out to me, wiggling it to get my attention. "Here."

I flashed him my palm and shook my head. Using the bottom, Vignar slapped my hand down and thrust the bottle in my face. "Drink the mead, Gorm."

I'd known Vignar since we were boys running through the village streets, covered in mud and horse shit as we slashed at one another with long sticks, the wood clacking loudly as we laughed and cursed and had all of the joy in the world at our fingertips. I knew him better than I even knew myself, so I understood when he wouldn't be reasoned with. I took the bottle.

He spoke while I drank. "She wasn't there."

I nodded, swallowed, and took another deep drink. The taste of fire and honey touched my tongue.

Vignar continued. "I checked every chamber. Every room. The tower." He paused and sighed as he took the bottle from me, wincing at the words. "The...cellar."

"Cellar?" I said.

Vignar mumbled his answer as he swallowed, "Mhm." He passed the bottle back

to me. “Wasn’t as bad down there as I expected. But still...”

“Aye,” I said, “but still.”

Folk from the nearby towns and villages had lost people. More people than one could ever imagine. For hundreds of years, people disappeared from their homes, taken in the night. Everyone heard the rumors. About the things made of smoke and shadows that roamed the woods at night. The crouched things that hid under the heavy brush in the needles and thorns, the red things that patrolled distant hills, the things that scared even the moonchildren as they paraded around ponds and bogs and lakes. Some told stories about footsteps in the night, following them home to their doors. Others told of yips and chatterings of something that crept up to windows and woke the dead with their cries.

Thirteen days ago, two children went missing. And the town folk called for us.

The missing were all in the cellar. Every bit of what little that was left of them. Rooms filled with glistening viscera.

Five days ago, we went to Crestfall Manor for the first time and barely left with our lives. Well, Vignar anyways. My life ended that night, just not right away. My death followed me a few more days.

A sharp pain shot down my forearm and into my fingertips, cramping my hands into claws, stuck vibrating in a painful expression of animalistic rage. I hissed, ripping my sleeve and flinging my glove to the steps below. I grabbed my burning wrist and struggled against the pain, gritting my teeth as black lines of diseased blood flowed in topographical rivers from the three-holed wound below my wrist. The holes dotted up from my palm to the center of my forearm, black and scabbed, oozing white and yellow pus. The serpentine lines spreading from them twisted and curled, flowing through my veins like lava.

When the initial pain subsided and I could breathe again, Vignar took his hand from my back—I hadn’t even realized he had been rubbing it—and picked up the bottle, motioning with the other to the bodies at our feet. “And you’re sure, *absolutely* sure, that she isn’t one of these ones? It was dark, Gorm, and maybe you thought you saw her and—”

“It was the woman,” I said, “I should know—she was latched on to *my* fucking arm.”

“Point taken,” he said. He sighed. It was an exhausted, out-of-options sigh.

“So tomorrow”—he brightened up—“I’ll start asking around, find out if anyone knows any other hiding place these freaks used—”

“No.”

“—and then when we search those places, we—”

“No. Stop.”

“—take it slow. They saw us coming the first time, they didn’t this time. But she sure as hell will right now—”

“I said *no*, godsdamnit!”

Vignar looked taken aback. “No?” he whispered, unsteady on his tongue. “What do you mean, ‘no?’”

“We won’t have time. Look at this, look at my arm; I don’t have the time, Vignar.”

“Don’t be stupid, we can still—”

I held up my hand, its bloody stillness cutting through the silence. “No. I don’t have the time. I was reckless coming here, I know that. If we had taken it your way —”

“No, my plan was—”

“If we had taken it your way, maybe it would have been different. Maybe it wouldn’t have been. That does not matter—what matters is, it was my fault, not yours. Release your guilt, Vignar. You did not kill me.”

Vignar shook his head and looked away.

I continued. “My fate is my own. It always has been, right? It was always *ours*. After everything we’ve seen, everything we’ve done, this is fitting. It has always needed to be this.

“I do not want to spend my final hours, as few as there will be, running around fighting these things, never having a moment to just be us. No”—I shook my head —“I don’t want that. Right now, I just want to watch the darkness come. I want to drink that bloody mead and sit here and just have a *moment*. Can you respect that?”

Vignar sniffed, still craning his neck away. He had one hand white-knuckled around the bottle and the other rubbing the back of his neck as he bounced his knee. “What if I’m not ready to do this without you?”

“You have to be. That choice has been made for us.”

“But what if I’m not?”

“There are no *what ifs* now. You will be.”

Vignar looked at me, the scar crossing his face from brow to lips glowing eerily bright in the oncoming dusk. He was crying. “I’m going to miss you, you damn bastard.”

He fell into my arms then and I held him as close to my chest as I could. My strength had been exhausted clearing the house but I still held him with everything I had left. I buried my face in his hair and we sat there for a moment. The smell of the wrapped corpses below wafted towards us in the hot summer air.

“Now,” I began, pushing his face from me and wiping my own with the back of my hand, “I’m perfectly content with sitting here in your arms all night and drinking that shite mead until the sun comes up and I burst into ash—and I still intend to do that—but can we please burn those fuckers?”

Vignar looked at me, sniffing, before looking at the bodies at our feet and chuckling. It was foreign and strained at first but then it broke free and became a full-bodied eruption. I joined him and together we sat and we laughed. When we regained ourselves, Vignar took another drink, passed it to me, and stood up. “Now that sounds like a fuckin plan, aye.”

I stood and clapped him on the shoulder. I nodded and we marched down the steps. In a matter of moments, the sun was gone and we were alight in the glowing red of the flames dancing before us. The smell was awful, and twice I had to toss in a stray arm or errant leg, but it was pleasant enough.

We didn’t talk much. But we stayed there and we shared the mead, waiting for the sun to rise, watching the fires burn down. And down. The two of us knew that when the burning stopped, so would I. So we waited until they were nothing but so much ash, and when the flames were gone and as the skies began to brighten, Vignar left.

No matter how long the bodies burned, it was not nearly long enough.



Mason McDonald



Mason McDonald is a writer from Cape Breton NS, Canada. His debut story collection, *A Time For Monsters*, is out now. He currently resides in Port Morien NS with his wife Jenna and their three dogs and two cats.

Twitter: @Mas0nMcD0nald

Substack: Mason McDonald

Substack newsletter: *Graveyard Pillow Talk*

A SNEAK PEEK AT



Violent Delights & Midsummer Dreams

A Midsummer Night's Dream

"Brockengespenst!" Hilda interrupted her new story for an old one. Tales her mother told of the mountains of her girlhood—of the clouds rising to the summit of the Brocken, of rainbows haloed over hikers, of human shadows grown to the size of giants. The Brocken Specter. "I never thought I'd see one!" Hilda grabbed Dietrich's arm, the way she would have when they were children, before everyone was so intent on their marriage.

"I don't see anything," Dietrich grumbled.

"Oh, perhaps it is because you are too tall. Bend down, look at my shadow!" The enormous shadow, crowned with a rainbow, did not waver.

Dietrich's stubbled cheeks drooped into a frown. "There is no need to tease. I gave you more time, and now you have written your first line. Let's go." He started back down the worn, wide trail.

Hilda waited a moment longer, marveling at the size of her shadow. It was all simply a trick of the light, she knew, that let someone so small cast a shadow so large. "Will I ever see you again?" Hilda asked. In all of her years, this was the first Brocken Specter she had seen. She wanted to stay with it, marveling until the illusion broke, until the sun set and could no longer illuminate the mist with its rainbows. But Dietrich was calling her name, so she whispered her farewells and hurried after him.

Hilda's too-large shadow followed her home.

Follow Darkness Like a Dream
Erin Feating

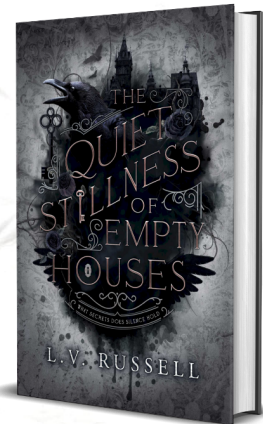
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SUBMISSIONS

A deep thank you to everyone who submitted a story. It is truly special for us when you share your works, regardless of their acceptance. While your story may not have been chosen, next month's theme is *Saints & Sinners* and it could be your chance to spin us a dark tale. If you are interested in seeing your story published in *The Crow's Quill*, please check our website for more details.

We'd be honored to have a look.

Are you a poet?

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

Sincerely, from Quill & Crow's Associate Editor,

L.R. Wieland



TRIGGER INDEX

- **Body horror**
 - mentioned.....*Eat His Heart*
- **Cannibalism**
 - implied.....*Eat His Heart*
- **Child death**
 - mentioned *Crestfall*
Lend Me Thy Hand (excerpt)
- **Classism**
 - implied.....*We Need to Discuss Agenda Item 6b*
- **Death**
 - mentioned/implied..... *All stories*
- **Emotional abuse**
 - implied.....*Othello (excerpt)*
- **Gore and violence**
 - mentioned..... *Crestfall*
Eat His Heart
We Need to Discuss Agenda Item 6b
- **Racism**
 - implied.....*Othello (excerpt)*
- **Sexual harassment/coercion**
 - implied..... *Such Sweet Uncleaness (excerpt)*
- **Transphobia**
 - implied.....*The Winds Did Sing (excerpt)*
- **Zombies**
 - mentioned.....*We Need to Discuss Agenda Item 6b*

THANK YOU

We are so grateful for the pieces written by our talented authors and poets. And thank you to our Crow family and community for your continued enthusiasm and support!

And of course, to our Kickstarter 2023 backers, we owe you so very much and we hope to make good on the bright future you helped make possible for us.

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