



THE CROW'S QUILL

OCTOBER 2021 VAMPYRES

BLOOD-DRAINING TALES OF VAMPYRES

Eight short stories teeming
with tension & terror.

THE APOTHECARY'S ASSISTANT

In celebration of LIMINALITY,
this issue features a short
story by the multi-talented
Cassandra L. Thompson.

POET SPOTLIGHT

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

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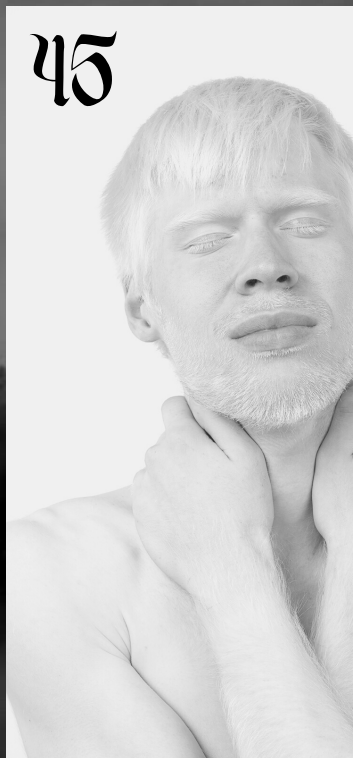
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Quill & Crow Publishing House is a quaint and curious press dedicated to promoting the integrity of independent literature. Specializing in all things gothic and macabre, we strive to preserve the upmarket prose while lifting up voices often unheard.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



Written by Mary Rajotte

In a labyrinthine hive concealed underground, we slumber well past daylight. At dusk, we awaken. My offspring, to feed, and I, their Dark Mother, to command them.

Our nest is a subterranean network of honeycombed alcoves, natural coffins affixed by the worker drones to the cavern ceiling.

When the moon rises, I emerge to my waiting brood, peeling away the protective membrane of veined skin across my cell and sloughing off viscous amber jelly that clings to me in ribbons.

Dozens of taloned fingers trail along the back of my legs and grasp at my face. Clinging to me, my scions collapse to their knees, their starkly angular cheekbones underscoring obsidian eyes. With their heads bowed, they shudder under my gaze, awaiting my instruction.

When my feral command pierces the night, their rasping cries become a chorus of anguish for their unmet desires.

"Dozens of taloned fingers trail along the back of my legs and grasp at my face. Clinging to me, my scions collapse to their knees, their starkly angular cheekbones underscoring obsidian eyes."

Their hunger for blood left unsated, any blood, animal or human, as long as it's sweetened by sunlight, they shall never know. They burst from the cavern, a shadowy veil of magnificent pestilence spreading across the land, their very presence choking the stars, eclipsing the moon, deadening those spaces where the other night creatures skitter and slither underfoot.

When the rhythmic flicker and trill of insects falls to a hush, my offspring do my bidding to keep my Queendom fed. For I am fading. My energy diminishes each day. Soon, my children will murder me to crown another.

Anticipating their return, I tend to the brood chambers, a tiered gallery of larval cells. Inside, new progenies linger in suspended animation, drained of their human blood and replenished by the vital fluid deposited there when they were turned. Lowly droning with hunger, they transition over time. Their fingernails grow into spinous points. Their teeth thin and elongate. Their organs putrefy in their own filth. Insidiousness infects their core, staining their eyes forever black.

As a Queen in my prime, I would feed them myself. Now it's up to the swarm. To stalk. To capture. To overpower and subdue. And when they have procured sustenance enough to replenish the colony, they return in a turbulent wave. At the entryway, two sentries sniff each brood-mate in turn, only allowing them passage when they catch the lingering scent of my pheromones, the vitality that created them.

They arrive with their cheeks still sunken, their lidless eyes darkly ravenous. With them, a squirming victim, his nostrils flaring with each panicked breath, slips into a trance when he sees me. Baring their teeth, my scions screech, their serrated fangs lengthening in anticipation, but they wait to feed. Withered or invigorated, their Queen always drinks first.

Hurling their prey to the dirt floor, they kneel before me. Bloodlust rushes like malevolent worms under their wan skin. Their bodies tremble with agitation, snarls rumble in their throats, jostling with one another to be the first when I am through. Clinging to one another, they cocoon me for protection as I gather their offering in my daunting embrace.

I take my time, wrapping my claws around the young man's throat and cradling him to my breast until our heartbeats become one. When at last he looks up, submitting to my power, I drink.

Pricking his skin, my fangs slip into his flesh and with that first spurt of blood across my forked tongue, the world falls away into a pitch-black utopia, cool, perfumed by his terror, thundering to his heartbeat. My body blushes with each pulsation, his vitality flowing into me, yet not rejuvenating my frailty. As I imbibe and raise my gaze to my insatiable swarm, the realization that the lifeblood doesn't sustain me the way it once did turns their compliance to cunning.

Once sated, I stagger backward and fall drunkenly to the floor, but my progenies do nothing to help me. In a trance, they unhinge their jaws, extend their talons and nudging me

aside, they descend on their victim.

I crawl to the center of the hive, where my cell awaits, and once cocooned within, I smear handfuls of warm honey across my skin. Trapped inside, bits of flesh and rotting teeth are proteins to sustain me. Curdled bile and spinal fluid energize, sweetly perfumed with filth and rot. Yet these remains from previous kills only remind me that soon, I'll be nothing more than detritus discarded and left to decay.

Once they have fed, my offspring approach with delicate caution. Using their filament-thin tongues, they lick away the blood spilled down my chin. When they finish, they move aside, offering no solace or concern, a slight that stings more than I expect. I foresaw this day, when another would take over my Queendom. Perhaps I hoped for sorrow, for a tribute to my reign, one final act of idolatry for the Dark Gift. Instead, they turn away with no need for me any longer. Their lips stained with the spoils of feeding and skin slick with sweetly honey-scented blood, they seize the human, confining him to a cell and sealing it so he can pupate, metamorphose, and emerge as something greater, advancing the colony I'll no longer reign over.

When the swarm turns back to face me, mutiny a sinister glint in their eyes, I sense that day is near.



Enfeebled, I remain dormant in my alcove for days. My hair, dark as night, fades to the color of sun-dried corn silk. My skin, once plush and waxen with the lifeblood of those on which I fed, desiccates into crêpe-like parchment. Normally, my offspring would bring supple young things, cutting them from stem to stern, spilling open their offerings like ripe fruit for me to imbibe, but they no longer help me feed. With no nourishment, my eyes blanch. My lips thin and pull back. My fangs grow brittle and marbleize into two fossilized spindles. Unable to retract them, they extend over my bottom lip, slicing my tender skin with each gasping breath.

With clawed fingertips grazing the wax seal over my cell, my young ones keep watch longing to get inside. They press their skeletal faces to the film, first one, then a half dozen. Soon, there are too many to count. Their eyes palpitate from side to side, waiting to use my frailty to their advantage. Life is not eternal for an aged Queen. Not when my successor waits to replace me.

Weakened, my head slumps forward, forcing me to witness as the worker drones prepare for my demise. Regurgitating thick, yellow globules, they bind the substance together, shaping a dozen cells as large as mine. Inside they place young females, swathing each one in a pool of shimmering opalescent ooze before sealing them inside.



Comfort of the Dark Mother

Mary Kajotte

Within their cells, my daughters metamorphose over a number of days. Their pallid faces grow gaunt. Every sinew in their bodies stretches and pulls taut. They shift and reshape into something stronger, a creature worthy of commanding her brood.

The first to fully develop flings herself against the walls of her cell, drawing the attention of the workers, who besiege her, biting through the membrane to release her. With a piercing trill, she collapses to the ground. The other females return her call, not in solidarity, but as a challenge. Pushing up onto her feet, she advances on the others struggling to break free. Before they can emerge, she punctures the membrane, plunging her stinger talons into her brood-mate's chest. Continuing down the line, she attacks those who cry out, eradicating each until she stands as the lone survivor. Pride washes through me at her strength. Her ferocity. The prowess she learned at my heel that will inevitably be my undoing.

I burst from my chamber and advance on her first as my final act of supremacy. When we crash together, her body sleek and strong, mine timeworn and slick with honeyed sweat, I force her backward. It takes everything in me to stave off her attack, but it isn't enough.

She shoves me into the awaiting swarm, her brothers and sisters encircle me, pressing their angular bodies against mine, suckling my last remnants of energy. With hooked fingernails, they prick my skin, stinging, slicing. Howling, I lash at them, but they only sink their pincers deeper, tearing long furrows down my arms.

Enclosing me in their rabid embrace, the swarm pulsates, squeezing tighter. Thundering blood pulses in my head as the cluster cinches tighter, roasting me from the inside.

Spinning, I fling my weight against the cavern walls, but I'm outnumbered. Some embed their nails into my emaciated arms, peeling away thick ribbons of skin. Others snarl and sink their incisors into the crook of my neck, forcing me to the ground, ravaging me with their gluttonous embrace.

As my life-force drains, I degenerate into a pale, wraithlike thing overcome by my love for my progenies, dethroned by the unbridled vitality I gave to them. Succumbing to their ruthlessness, a black veil engulfs me, only the euphoric crescendo of my brood's savagery lulling me to my excruciating end.



-Street- Mary Rajotte



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

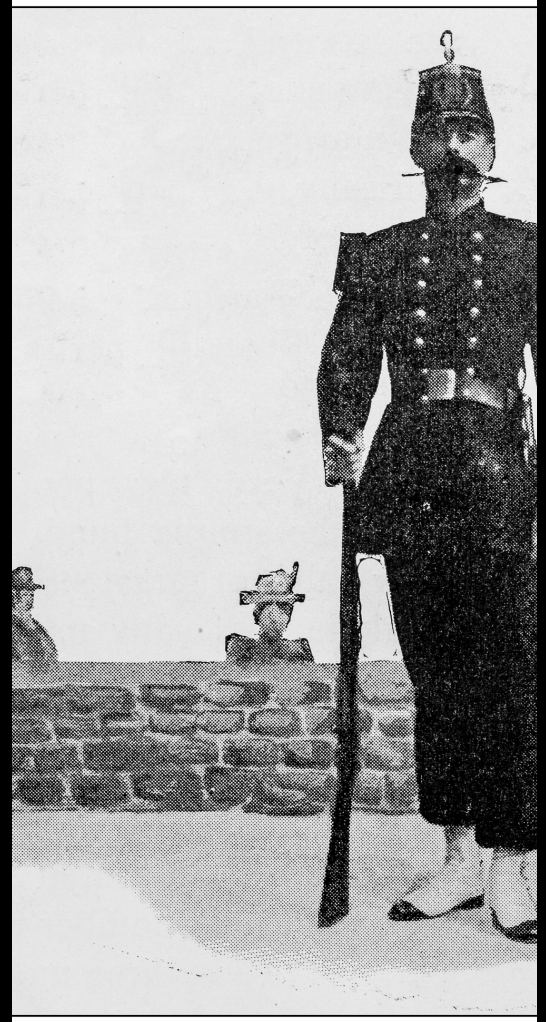
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Promise Me This



Written by Stephen Black

I have no family left and my few friends have fallen by the wayside this last year, as his lingering presence has seeped into every crevice of my broken mind. A life of comfort had been mine. No wife or brood of whining brats to fritter away my fortune. I had campaigned across three continents, for King and Country. Nobody could have begrudged me a quiet retirement with my dogs and the occasional glass of port.

Nobody except him.

We met but once and briefly, yet from that date onwards his pale, ravaged features dogged my every waking thought. It was a day like no other. 18 June 1815, eight miles outside Brussels, near a sleepy hamlet known as La Belle Alliance. It nestled behind a ridge, a sweeping valley separating it from another huddle of buildings on the far side.

Waterloo.

"I watched as the life ebbed from his shining onyx eyes, the battle raging beyond. It was just us, two lost souls thrown together, the flotsam of a titanic struggle between two gargantuan powers."

Wellington preferred the way the word rolled off his tongue and decided it would be easier for the British public to remember. For this was a day the watching world would never forget.

We were nestled in an old quarry just beyond the Allied line. Across the valley, less than a thousand yards away, sat the French. I saw Bonaparte himself that morning, inspecting his troops, before the first blue wave rolled towards us, column after column of la Grande Armée, their buckles glinting in the meagre sun that leaked through the blanket of fog and gunpowder smoke. A savage artillery bombardment heralded their advance, squealing over our heads to pound the infantry squares on the reverse side of the ridge.

Our orders were to skirmish, and I was the best shot in the regiment. When the French advanced, we would scuttle from the quarry and fan out across the valley floor, picking off targets as we saw fit. We were trained to target officers, for that always sent panic through the ranks. Nothing unnerved a man more than the splatter of his Colonel's blood across his cheeks. I had taken down three that day with my trusty Baker rifle before thirst forced me back towards the sanctuary of the quarry.

I had barely covered a hundred yards, crouched low, when a French tirailleur sent me sprawling, my shoulder holed by a musket ball. I clamped a hand over my mouth to stifle the scream, playing dead as the French line lumbered towards my stricken form. God was with me though, as they veered left at the last second, ascending the ridge with hearty cries of "Vive L'Empereur!"

That was when I saw him, propped against an abandoned artillery wagon, hand pressed to his side as a slick, ruby-red bloom seeped across the unblemished canvas of his billowing white shirt. A weak smile traversed his pasty pallor as he beckoned me over. I hurriedly crawled alongside, grateful for a brief respite from the unrelenting clamour of warfare.

He was a cavalry officer, no more than twenty years old. I asked him what had happened and he told me his tale. The Union Brigade had charged the French earlier in the afternoon, thundering down the ridge, their breastplates glistening, a berserker bloodlust eclipsing any semblance of discipline. They had scythed through the retreating French, hacking and slicing with gleeful abandon. The carnage was mighty as their charges carried them across the valley floor.

Horses blown and spirits extinguished, they found themselves isolated and exposed. His mount was felled, forcing him to trudge back through the cloying mud, weighed down by redundant armour. Easy pickings for the French counter-attack, a sabre thrust leaving him to await his maker, guts seeping through his fingers. We both knew I was conversing with a dead man.

I watched as the life ebbed from his shining onyx eyes, the battle raging beyond. It was just us, two lost souls thrown together, the flotsam of a titanic struggle between two gargantuan powers. My shoulder throbbed in time to my heartbeat but despite the searing pain, I knew I would live to see the next hour, whatever fresh hell it held. He had but minutes.

“My pocket,” he gasped, every word a chore that sucked what little strength there was left from his frail frame. The words barely carried to me above the rumble of the twelve-pounders. The French had crested the ridge and were pummelling the patchwork quilt of Allied squares with musket and cannon. A lone horse emerged from the low mist, driven mad by the sights and sounds of senseless slaughter. It whinnied, wildly careering down the ridge towards us, its grey neck smeared with a bloody hand mark. As the beast hurtled past, it disturbed a murder of crows, feasting on the innards of a fallen redcoat. They shrieked into the foreboding skies, already searching for their next bloated banquet.

“My pocket,” he hissed again, his reedy voice more insistent now, oblivious to the acre of death surrounding us. I considered him properly for the first time, anaemic skin stretched over sharp cheekbones, caked with greasy clay. His eyes glistened like shiny pebbles beneath a mop of boyish black curls. His braided epaulettes informed me he was a junior officer, no doubt bought his commission by wealthy parents.

He fumbled with a tunic button, producing a chained pocket watch. Even my uneducated eye recognised its beauty, eggshell-blue face encased in polished silver. The young man gazed at it fondly, its tiny hand marking the final seconds of his life.

“My name is Sampson. Lieutenant George Sampson of the 49th.”

“The Somersets?” Their fame was renowned, the finest line regiment in the army.

The young man nodded before a painful spasm contorted his features, reducing him to a coughing fit. I rested a hand on his forearm, words failing me when most needed. There was nothing I could say, nothing I could do to alter what was coming. When he looked at me again, his lips were flecked with blood, a resigned smile softening hawkish features.

“Tell my parents I died well. With honour. Return this watch to them and I will find you by God’s Grace in the afterlife.” He thrust the timepiece into my hands, squeezing my wrist with surprising strength.

“Promise me this.”

I nodded, numb with grief for a man I barely knew. A final request, fulfilling a fellow officer’s dying wish.

“I promise you this.”

He let go, a satisfied expression replacing his previous anguish. Exhaling once, he emitted a hoarse rattle and then was still, his eyes devoid of life. I leaned forward but no breath passed his lips. He was no more.

A triumphant trumpet announced the death knell of Bonaparte’s legions as a ragged, blue line broke and bolted back down the ridge. The British squares had held and the French flood was pursued by our heavy cavalry, moustachioed dragoons leaning low in the saddle, reaping a bloody harvest. I scuttled under the wagon and remained there until it was over, Bonaparte halfway to Paris, tail between his legs. The day was ours.

To the victor, the spoils.

I looked down at the watch, cradled in my hand. Just gone seven on the day my life changed forever.



I woke with a hoarse scream, tears staining my sunken, blanched cheeks. It mattered not, my cries were never answered.

I had been a resident, for that was the accepted phrase, at Monroe Asylum for the last eleven months. One day drifted seamlessly into the next, my malaise cushioned by a comforting pharmaceutical fog. I slept a lot.

Except for when he visited.

I sold the watch before boarding a schooner in Brussels, my knapsack full of coin. After the battle, I had crawled through the muddy morass towards the ridge where a passing commissary found me, piling my body atop a cart with all the other broken souls. The journey back to the capital was agonising, every pothole driving sizzling shards of agony through my pierced shoulder. A pain I would have done anything to relieve. Anything.

I sold the watch to the surgeon who operated on me. His eyes lit up when he saw it and I gained only a fraction of its true worth. I cared not. When discharged from the hospital, it bought me enough wine and wenches to dull the physical pain and the memory of Sampson to a distant haze.

He visited me on the first anniversary of the battle, my mind and body healed and enough money left to buy my way out of the regiment and invest modestly, but shrewdly, in the city. I was comfortable, the horrors of that bloody day locked away in my deepest recesses.

On the stroke of seven, he called. A year to the day since his passing. To the very second. You could set your watch by him.

The same languid, liquorice eyes now glowed unnaturally, burrowing into my disbelieving mind as he crouched astride me, pinning my arms with strong, sinewy thighs. He laughed, revealing ungodly teeth, caked with the dirt of a mass, anonymous grave. I pleaded for mercy but he lunged forward, sinking cruel canines into my scarred shoulder. I could smell the battlefield off him, the acrid sulphur of gunpowder mixed with the ripe, heavy aroma of bloated, gassy corpses. He feasted on my flesh as I had dined off his demise.

I screamed, memories of the betrayal assailing my beleaguered senses. In the days that followed, I sought to convince myself it had been an opium-drenched nightmare, but there was no explanation for the vivid purple discolouration adorning my punctured skin the following morning.

His first visit undid my mind. I unravelled, soon consigned to the asylum where I awaited him in a drugged stupor, chained to my bed.

The second time, he drank more, gorging on an open vein, his lips gleefully stained with my bloody essence. He was taking back what had not been mine. A simple request, the last wish of a dying man. I had spat on his corpse and pawned his most precious possession. Now he would have his vengeance, and I would pay the price for my dishonour.

My awareness drifted, part delirium, part blood-loss as he fed. Finally, he cupped my chin so I had no choice but to stare into bottomless black eyes, swirling rouge flecks dancing across the irises. “A year since we last met and time has not treated you well. A shame, given you thought your future was secured at my expense.” He cocked his head like an attentive puppy, savouring every twitch and groan of my misery.

I had no words, tongue frozen, shoulder ablaze as he prodded the old wound with a gnarled nail.

“I will not outstay my welcome. But hear this. I will return on this date every year until the end of your days. So you may continue to repay your debt to my family and I. They are with me now. My mother lasted not six months until grief consumed her. My father a month after that, his brains sprayed across the study wall. All because of you.”

“I needed to eat.” As the words left my lips, I knew any protestations were futile. He knew nothing but vengeance and wrath. A cruel smirk crossed his face.

“Enough. The time for talking is past. Until next year. And do not think of exiting this world between now and then. Your life in this madhouse is barely an existence but believe me, it is nothing compared to the terrors that await you should you care to join me in the afterlife before your time.” He leaned forward again, feral fangs exposed, and drank deeply from my vein before rising, my anguished cry reduced to a pitiful whimper. Smiling, he parted with the words I knew he would speak.

“I promise you this.”



-Street- Stephen Black



Stephen Black is a blogger and fantasy writer from Northern Ireland. He lives in the rolling countryside outside Belfast where he thinks dark thoughts and writes darker tales. He is married with three hatchlings. 'Promise Me This' is his first dalliance with gothic horror...but it won't be his last.

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The Monster Within



Written by Alice Callisto

Shadows dance on the cabin walls, the fire warming the small, damp living room. It is just past midnight and the moon is high in the sky. I sit alone in my red ragged chair, resting my head against the pillow, my hair damp from the sweat and snow. I spent hours trudging the forest, preparing traps and snares knowing this bounty would be one of the most dangerous ones that I would ever collect.

The details of the bounty were limited. It stated that there is a man that has been going around the village and draining unsuspecting women of their blood. Their withered corpses were found abandoned in back streets and alleys. Usually it was one of the men closing up the tavern who found them. By then it was too late, the murderer gone and the woman, well. A cold corpse.

I lift my glass of whiskey, taking a deep sip of the amber liquid. It burns the back of my throat as I throw it back. This is the only way I can keep control of the emotions that threaten to spill through me. It doesn't work.

"There are a couple of scars on my pale ivory skin. My longest running from cheek to jaw. It was given to me by my last opponent—a vampire."

Memories push themselves forward as I remember the last body uncovered behind the tavern. Her blonde hair reached down to her ivory shoulders. I have never seen anyone so pale before. Her lips were chapped, blood dried in the cracks. The only blood that could be seen on the body. Her neck was motionless where a heartbeat should have been. I remember the screams of despair as the woman's mother found her there. Her beautiful, kind daughter. The one who made her proud. She was my sister. The latest in the murderer's killings.

Gripping my sword, I stand and make my way to the mirror. I am completely different compared to my younger sister. My hair is darker and cropped short to my shoulders. I have just enough hair to tie it back into a ponytail when I am in combat. There are a couple of scars on my pale ivory skin. My longest running from cheek to jaw. It was given to me by my last opponent—a vampire.

Their kind has given me many scars, including the most recent one on my neck. I know that whatever killed my sister is one of them. Those goddamn leeches take everything that is good in this world.

I stare into my bloodshot eyes for only a moment before looking away. I can't face the truth. Not yet. Once I accept what has happened to me, there is no going back.

A bell goes off outside and I push myself up from the wall, rolling my shoulders back. The sound is like music to my ears and a smile creeps up on my lips. This is it. The bat has sprung the trap.

I lift my sword from the ground, placing it on my shoulder before I step out into the night. The snow has finally stopped falling, the stars lighting my way. There are no footprints, but I can smell him. Metallic and musty scents come from the north. My lip curls as I trudge through the snow to my destination. I can barely feel the cold on my skin as the wind brushes the tiny hairs on my back.

It takes a couple of minutes before I reach my trap. The steel jaws have snapped off the vampire's leg leaving behind his bloody stump. Lucky for me, there is now a blood path leading me towards my prey. I take a deep breath before silencing myself. My eyes adjust to the darkness as I creep deeper into the woods. A couple of crows caw in the trees. Their sense of blood and death lead them here. They wait patiently for their meal. I can feel their beady black eyes on me but I shake off the feeling, walking on.

There in the distance, I see him. The blood-sucking leech. He crawls with his arms, trying to make it to the cave a little ways down the path. I stare at his severed leg, a small lump starting to form. Vampires naturally respawn missing body parts, though it can take a couple of days to a month for them to fully grow back.

I sheath my sword, unstrapping my bow from my shoulder. I nock an arrow, pulling it back to meet my lower lip. One shot to immobilize him with my poison, silver-tipped arrow. That is all I need before I end this.

My eyes focus on the muscle in his right shoulder before I release the arrow. It goes flying before landing on its target. I hear the vampire curse, his body shuddering as the poison takes

effect. I smirk, strapping my bow onto my back before strolling down the hill.

Once I reach his body, I place my foot on his back and yank out my arrow. His blood spurts all over the freshly fallen snow, and it brings a smile to my face. I toss the arrow to the ground before I begin to circle him. He has handsome features, a chiseled jaw complimented by a five o'clock shadow. His body is well built, made to be a hunter and his eyes are the colour of crimson, reminding me of what he truly is.

"Now why was a vampire in my village? Have you not heard the warnings?" I hum, crossing my arms across my chest. Though I appear amusing, I am anything but. There is only a thin thread of control left in my body, and one wrong move will have him lose his head.

"I heard the blood there was sweet," he hisses.

I shove my heel in his face and a loud crunch echoes in the forest. The vampire shouts in pain. "Yet you knew there is a vampire hunter who protects the village fiercely. No leech gets in and out of it alive." I grab a fistful of his hair, lifting his head up. "Why her?"

The vampire tilts his head. "Why, who? There were many hers. Each one's blood is sweeter than the last."

I hiss, gripping his hair tighter. "You know who I am talking about. Now tell me. Why her?"

He only laughs, blood spitting from his lips. "Why I did it for you—"

I don't let him finish as I shove his face into the ground, my breathing heavy. I should end him right here. Cut off his head and tribute it to my sister, but I can't. I need to know how he knew about her. If any of the others know. With my family around, I will always have a weakness. I need to cut ties with them as soon as I kill the other vampires who know about them. I lift his head up again.

"How did you know?" I spit.

"Hm...you must be a bit more specific, hunter." He chuckles.

"How did you know it was my sister?" I shout.

"Ah, you don't know?" He laughs.

"Obviously not." I growl, gritting my teeth.

"We have started keeping tabs on you, Abigail."

My chest tightens at my name. "Who?"

"All of us. We know what makes the vampire huntress tick, and I think I know what will break you, dear girl."

My body shakes with rage. "What is it?"

"You are a monster just like the rest of us. They will never accept you. Not after they see what you have become."

I see red, lifting my sword and swinging it down on the vampire's neck. Warm crimson blood covers my hands, but I no longer get sick from the feeling. I haven't gotten sick after my fifth kill.

The Monster Within

Alice Callisto

I drop the head onto the ground before putting my weapons away. Snow slowly falls to the ground as the vampire's body slowly evaporates into dust. Soon, there will be no evidence of what happened here. Nothing but what will stay in my memory.

After what feels like hours, I pull myself away from the scene and make my way back to the cabin. As soon as I arrive, I drop my sword and bow to the ground, followed by my arrows and bag. I run over to the mirror, gripping the wood in front of it.

They will never accept you.

You are a monster.

I slam my fist against the wood and it splinters, my blood staining it. I lift it, looking at the back of my hand as my skin slowly starts to stitch itself together. It's too late for me. I look into the mirror to face my truth. Red eyes, pale skin, sharp fangs. I am one of them. A monster. A vampire. And I can never go back.



-Street- Alice Callisto



Alice Callisto is a fantasy/romance writer and poet. She started writing in high school and has continued to grow since. She recently started writing horror and is very excited to continue in this genre. Alice co-wrote “The Conqueror’s Princess,” her debut novel, and it will be released November 5th.

Twitter: @LostPlanetPluto
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ACROW'S
POEM

CENTURIES

The malevolent toll of the vesper bell
Awakens me from my harrowed sleep
Shadowed gravestones, each at tortured tilt
Torment rests here, vexatious and vicious
She sleeps, blanketed in loam
Beneath the rusted iron cage
That repels the resurrection men
Yet this one, is to keep her within,
Wrench the mesh from the coldest stone
Sink to my knees and await her to wake
This mournful bride, she rises tonight

Rose thorns dragged through the skin of my hands
As I tried to tether the dreams of you
Crimson drips and drops from the wrists
I offer this blood, in earnest, my poetess
A vampyre?
Of course it is you,
The unhealing wounds weep on my neck
From iniquitous nights of seduction
Now sleep eludes me once more, forever more,
I am night, I am yours
For as long as you thirst for me,
I am ready
For the centuries

WRITTEN BY ANDREW DOUGHTY



Poet Spotlight

ANDREW DOUGHTY Questions by Marie Casey

1. Tell us what you know about dreams.

Dreams, for me, are always unsettling, sometimes weird, sometimes bad. After I wake, my memory of them evaporates, I can feel them being erased, after ten minutes they are gone, but they can leave me feeling discombobulated for several hours. I would be happy to never dream again.

2. What is your most poetic outlook on life?

The cynic and pessimist in me would say "it is better to be pleasantly surprised than to be disappointed" but I feel that may be seen as a bit miserable.

I'm going to go with a piece written by my idol and hero Roger Deakin, in his book *Wildwood*. It is a passage which sticks with me, like it is written upon my soul.

"To enter a wood is to pass into a different world in which we ourselves are transformed. It is no accident that in the comedies of Shakespeare, people go into the greenwood to grow, learn, and change. It is where you travel to find yourself, often, paradoxically, by getting lost."

3. In a zombie apocalypse, what is your weapon of choice?

I think a set of strange questions in which their answers will be published publicly is enough to frighten any zombie away, but failing that I'll choose a hedging tool called a billhook (Google it), I'd use one that belonged to my grandfather.

Blood Sisters



Written by Kristin Cleaveland

Dear Diary,

It has been scarcely a few days since Jonathan left for the Carpathians, but already I miss him dreadfully. I've been invited to stay with Lucy at her family's estate—for which I am very grateful—but her social calendar is quite full most days, and I am often left to my own devices.

I try to occupy myself with worthy pursuits such as writing, reading, or needlework, but my mind wanders always to Jonathan. If only someone else from his firm had been chosen to visit that mysterious Count in his distant, lonely castle tucked far back into the mountains. Jonathan assures me that it is a great opportunity for us, and that it will surely put him in a position to advance his career. I know he often worries about our future, but I don't require a fortune for happiness. I desire only him, forever.

"When she released me from her embrace, I fell into the deepest sleep I had ever known, and dreamed of a figure with red eyes, with the voice of a wolf."

Dear Diary,

We had the most lovely party last night at Lucy's estate. She and I spent the whole week planning the menu, what we would wear, and the dances we would choose. To be fair, I did not have many dresses to choose from—I wore last year's gown of ice blue—but Lucy wore a green silk dress that shimmered in the light like the scales of a snake. She even moves a bit like a snake—in a sinuous and languorous fashion—and when she dances, no man can take his eyes off her. She has three suitors now, each more handsome than the last, and they make quite a spectacle of themselves clamoring for her attention. Of course, I was quite happy with only Jonathan as my suitor, and more than pleased to accept his proposal. Lucy says she wishes she could marry all three! Last night she drank too much champagne and kissed each one in the dark when the others weren't looking. I can't imagine! She should accept one of their proposals soon, or she will have the whole town in a whirlwind of gossip.

I enjoyed myself at the party—the food was delicious, the table piled high with anything one could want—but I was distracted by thoughts of Jonathan. I wonder how he fares with the mysterious Count? I hope he is not delayed much longer. I miss his embrace, and his lips on mine.



Dear Diary,

Lucy has finally made up her mind! She accepted Mr. Holmwood's proposal. He is deliriously happy. Lucy's parents are thrilled with the match, and she is pleased, as well, if a bit sad to give up her other suitors. I do wonder sometimes what it is like to love more than one man. But of course, I am very satisfied with Jonathan and desperately hope he returns soon.

Today was also exciting because Lucy's family has decided to go on holiday in Whitby, and I am to accompany them! It will be nice to have a change of scenery to occupy my mind, for I am always so consumed by thoughts of Jonathan. Lucy has already packed three trunks full of dresses, and I have not even enough to fill one! But she is so kind, and always shares all her finery with me. She is truly like the sister I never had.



Dear Diary,

The most frightful thing happened last night! Lucy had a terrible bout of sleepwalking. We heard a scream and we all ran outdoors, where we found her with her nightdress ripped and her hair in disarray. Her eyes were glassy and wild, her lips torn and bleeding. She also had two tiny marks on her neck—as if bitten by mosquitoes, perhaps, or maybe she injured herself in a fall.

I led her back to her room, tucked her into bed, and wiped the sweat and blood from her face and neck with a cool cloth.

“Mina, it was so strange,” she said, and her voice sounded dreamy, as if she were still not fully awake. “There was a man—only he wasn’t a man—and there was also a wolf—only he wasn’t a wolf. Do you understand?”

I did not, but I stroked her brow and soothed her anyway. She grasped my wrist and looked into my eyes, as if desperate for me to understand. “He attacked me,” she said. “He was all fur, and teeth, and claws—but also hands, and long black hair, and lips that he pressed to mine so hard, I could scarcely breathe. His arms were strong, and he had a low voice, deep in his throat, that was half whisper and half growl. Oh, Mina! It was terrible.” But the look in her eyes and the flush in her cheeks seemed to suggest she had not found it terrible at all.

I assured her it had all been a dream, likely brought on by our unfamiliar surroundings. She shook her head. “Mina,” she whispered. “Do you think he will come again?” Her voice shook, but with fear or anticipation, I could not say. She was clearly agitated, so I lay down next to her on the bed and stroked her hair until she fell asleep. But I could not sleep, and lay awake long into the night, thinking about Lucy’s wolf.



Dear Diary,

I am desperately worried about Lucy. Her face has become pale and drawn, but her eyes are glassy and bright, as if she has a fever. She is highly excitable, and even seems to hallucinate; she always says she sees a shadowy figure with red eyes. I have been sleeping in her room at night, lest she wander outdoors. We were recently frightened by a large bat outside the window, illuminated in the moonlight. At least, I was frightened. Lucy seemed to welcome the sight, and slept peacefully.

She must certainly be very ill, and all her family and friends are beside ourselves with concern for her. But, oddly enough, she seems happy—more alive, more herself than ever. “Do you think he will come back, Mina?” she asks me every day. But I haven’t the faintest idea who she could be talking about.

My sleep suffers nightly, as I lie awake to protect Lucy from wandering. But when I do sleep, I have the strangest dream of a shadowy figure with red eyes. When I see him in my dreams, I am rooted to the spot—I want to get away, but I also feel a curious longing, and a desire to see what lives behind those eyes.

Dear Diary,

I have had terrible news from Budapest. Jonathan has been hospitalized with a terrible fever, and I must leave at once to nurse him back to health. I worry so much about leaving Lucy, however. I feel that part of my heart is with Jonathan, but the other part wants to remain here. It is my duty to go to him, however, and I will. I am making preparations immediately.



Dear Diary,

I have never been so overwhelmed in all my life! Last night, I fell asleep before Lucy did, and was awoken by her return to the bedroom we share. Once again, her nightdress was torn, and she was bleeding, her feet were bare and dirty, and her hair was slick with sweat. The most startling thing, however, was her eyes—they glowed bright red!

She slowly approached the bed, almost as if she did not know where she was. I tried to rouse her, thinking she was sleepwalking, but she suddenly spoke, and her voice was low and feral, the words spilling out almost faster than I could understand them. “Mina,” she said. “They will try to take me away. They will try to kill him. But I love him, Mina. I love him.”

I reassured her that no one was trying to take Mr. Holmwood away, and that as soon as she was well, they would be married as planned. To my great shock, Lucy spit on the floor at the mention of his name.

“It isn’t Holmwood I want! He can’t give me what I desire, just as Jonathan can’t give it to you. But someone else can.”

I was terrified, but desperately curious. “Who, Lucy? Who is this man you speak of?”

She looked at me, and her eyes were wild. “Do you truly want to know?” she asked. “He is looking for another bride. We could go to him together. Like sisters. But more.”

My heart was pounding in my chest. She bent down over me, so close that I could feel her breath on my neck. “Do you want to meet him?”

I hesitated—but only for a moment—and before I could object, she was covering my mouth with hers, hot and slick with blood. Her teeth caught on my lip, and with a gasp she sucked the blood from the wound.

My head felt light and dizzy, and she moved her mouth down my neck and I suddenly felt a sharp pain that was like nothing I had ever known before; ecstatic and terrifying and exhilarating all at once. When she released me from her embrace, I fell into the deepest sleep I had ever known, and dreamed of a figure with red eyes, with the voice of a wolf.



Dear Jonathan,

It is with sorrow and regret that I inform you I must break our engagement. I have nothing but the deepest respect and friendship for you, but I am afraid I cannot join you in Budapest. Lucy and I are going away together and don't know when we will return. Please do not try to find us—you must focus on recuperating from your fever, and returning to health.

I apologize from the bottom of my heart for any pain I have caused you, but my life has taken a different path. Maybe someday we will meet again, but I do not think it likely. I wish you all the best in life, Jonathan. Please be well.

Affectionately,
Mina Murray



-Street-

Kristin Cleaveland



Kristin Cleaveland is an author of horror and dark fiction. She has published stories with Quill & Crow Publishing House, Ghost Orchid Press, "Black Telephone Magazine," and more.

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The Apothecary's Apprentice

WRITTEN BY
CASSANDRA L. THOMPSON

- A SNEAK PEEK AT LIMINALITY -



Moldavia, 1479

There are times when one looks back on their life decisions and contemplates whether they were sound. As an apothecary's apprentice, I longed for enough money to fund my experiments. I had too many ideas for my own good, my mind a constant whirlwind of thoughts, speculations, ideas. So when the Royal Guard came to offer me a job working for the newly appointed Queen whilst tossing a purse of coins at my feet, there was no hesitation. I will regret that moment for the rest of my miserable existence.

I heard whispers trickling about the village regarding Queen Viorica Moldoveanu, but tried not to think of them as the guards escorted me to the palace. Prince Steven had been so young when he died, as was his wife before Viorica, who mysteriously disappeared prior. But there was little the people of Moldavia could do. Maria, as she was called then, was the daughter of Prince Radu and the niece of Vladimir Dracul of Wallachia, and to doubt or argue her authority was to cause grave civil unrest.

I only had a moment to observe the severe black monstrosity that was the palace before they whisked me down to my new home, an old cellar in the bowels of the castle. Make no mistake—though coarse and damp, it had been fashioned into a modern apothecary with all the tools I could ever want right at my disposal. I was beyond pleased although, on occasion, I heard wailing prisoners being tortured in the dungeon not far from where I worked.

Several days passed and nothing proved out of the ordinary. I mixed tinctures, boiled remedies, crushed herbs. I mended a scraped knee, produced a tea for one of the ladies-in-waiting. I had full confidence that I would be able to start my experiments soon. My case filled with baneful herbs and potions was hidden in the walls, calling to me. I couldn't wait to begin.

I had no reason to suspect that the Queen herself would one day arrive at my door.

I struggled not to betray my surprise upon seeing her, a glittering ruby of a woman standing poised amidst the dank, mouldering stones and thick cobwebs. Her silver effects glittered in the torchlight, her hands clasped in front of her billowing crimson gown. I once heard her described as devastatingly beautiful, but I'd never understood the term until now. She was a terrible, ethereal beauty. But it was her eyes that disarmed me the most, brilliant gold circling her irises, violently pushing away any other shade of brown.

I fell to my knees. "Your Majesty."

"I require a favor from you." Her accent was strange, but her words dripped like poison from her tongue. "It is of the utmost importance and it must be handled with complete discretion."

"Absolutely, my Queen."

"Bring him in," she commanded her guards.

It didn't register in my mind at first, not until the guards began dumping hunks of grizzly flesh upon my table. My body froze, fighting the natural urges to flee, vomit, or recoil. I couldn't help the beads of sweat that dampened my shirt, however, and I trembled beneath my stony exterior.

It was not the gore that shocked me—I had worked on many cadavers, cauterized wounds, and amputated fingers and toes gone black with rot. But nothing prepared me for the realization that the pieces of human being piled upon my table bore skin and muscle that were still *alive*.

It took every remnant of fortitude I had not to faint when they finally brought out the head, snakes of severed cords trailing the floor from its torn neck, beady black eyes rolling in their rotten sockets.

The Queen observed me, as if gauging my reaction. "I need you to stitch him back together again."

The head smacked the wood as the guards dropped it, releasing the tongue from its mouth, a fat black leech trapped in a useless vessel. My stomach churned, but I couldn't tell her what she asked of me was impossible. No part of me wanted to end up like the poor, fragmented wretch in pieces on my mixing table.

"We have brought you supplies to sew him up," she continued, gesturing to a bag in one of her guard's hands. "I have faith in you, young one." Her eyes danced.

I cannot recall how much time passed during my horrible trial. I concentrated only on the slow drip of water from the ceiling, soothing me as I drove a thin metal needle into putrid, living flesh that by all reasonable doubt should have been decayed. I knew very little about how the body operated, but amputations taught me there was no way to reattach limbs once they'd been disconnected. But still I toiled, managing to piece the body together until it was time to fasten the horrible head.

Vomit rose in my throat, choking me with the taste of bile, as the head's black eyes stared, holding me captive as I wove the thread around its mottled, gangrenous neck. That was when the Queen pushed me out of the way.

She leaned over the gruesome fiend, one delicate hand on its chest, one lightly patting what was left of its dark hair. "Dragos? Ares, my brother. Are you there?"

"The cords that make sound were cut and lost when the head was chopped off," I told her, my voice quivering. "I cannot fix it."

She nodded and before I could speak further, she bit down on her wrist. What looked like black ink poured from an impossibly deep wound, and she drizzled it into the creature's open mouth. As the gelatinous tongue slithered out to lap it up, I fell to the floor and retched, unable to withstand my repugnant surroundings any longer.

I kept my eyes squeezed shut as the creature stood, apparently rejuvenated by the Queen's own rotten blood. I didn't open them until I heard her graceful footsteps approach. "You have done quite well, young man," she soothed. "Your reward will be great."

She lifted me up with impossible strength and I fell into her, both repulsed and soothed by her cold, hard bosom with skin that smelled of dead rose and henbane, refusing to look at the hideous creature I helped create. I was defenseless in her arms as she nuzzled me, for in that moment I realized my decision to come to the castle was the worst I had ever made—not because of the terrible ordeal I have been forced to endure, nor the looming abomination behind her—but because I was helplessly under her thrall. I loved her completely, lost to bliss as she kissed my lips, my cheeks, my neck.

I swooned when she bit, unable to resist as she sank her teeth into my tender vein and drank the life from me. I let the warm unconsciousness take me, until she finished and I fell to the ground. Where were the choruses of angels they promised? I wondered as I lay.

My vision ebbed and flowed, my gaze trapped by her terrible beauty, unblemished by the blood—my blood—running down her chin and coating the tops of her breasts. How had no one realized she was an otherworldly being? Her fingernails like sharpened glass, the veins beneath her pale skin dark, her teeth edged to a point. Her utter magnificence. I watched her tear open her wrists once more, this time, aiming her curious black blood to my own lips as I drifted away.

"Here, young one," she soothed.

My beautiful Dark Queen.

"Have a taste."



The Walking Hours



Written by Rebecca Jones-Howe

Frederick's neck was itchy when he woke to the sound of Julia laughing maniacally downstairs. She sounded excited. Frederick scrambled out of bed to find his wife standing in the middle of the darkened living room, carrying a bottle of milk.

"I-I put sugar in, just for you." She held out the bottle but there was nobody there to take it. The glass shattered against the edge of the coffee table and she shrieked in delight. She then knelt and tried to clean the spill with her bare hands.

"Darling?" Frederick rushed down the stairs and touched her shoulder. "Julia, you're sleepwalking again."

She lifted her head and chuckled. "I-I heard a baby!" she said.

"There's no baby," Frederick said. "It's just me, darling. Come to bed."

She wasn't awake but Frederick helped her upstairs and tucked her in. He cleaned the spill before making himself a bed on the sofa, hoping that he'd wake in case she walked again.

"Julia smiled against his neck. "I want a baby, Fred. Let's have a baby." She curled herself against him and whimpered."

Frederick had only known Julia for a week before the world changed. She was smitten enough to give him a photo when he left for France with a fresh haircut and a gun. "You're the sweetest man I've ever met," she'd said. When Frederick returned unscathed, he held her face in his hands, swearing that she looked just the same. She nuzzled herself deep in his embrace, saying that he smelt just as sweet.

They married and bought a modest home in the suburbs. Everyone knew he was a soldier, a hero, but Frederick preferred it when people commented on the green yard that he painstakingly kept free of weeds. He craved normalcy, but then one night he woke to Julia laughing maniacally. He ran down the stairs to find her crawling on her stomach across the living room floor, cackling as she moaned about how thirsty she was.

"I've always been a sleepwalker," she said, serving him French toast the next morning. She hung her head in shame, but Frederick tucked his fingers beneath her chin.

"I guess I'm in love with a sleepwalker," he said.

Months passed and Frederick woke to Julia stumbling through the house like a toddler, her voice slurred and rambling, her dreams in full exposure. He loved her, even if she stripped herself naked, even if she cursed, even if she spilled drinks and food, even if she opened the door and went for a midnight walk. Sometimes he'd wake to find her gone and he'd tear through the streets in his slippers, screaming her name until he found her.

He was careful not to wake her, but sometimes she did and she found her bearings in his arms. Then she'd laugh. That was her constant. She always managed to make him smile, which is what Frederick did every morning when he walked outside to retrieve the newspaper and the new bottle of milk.

He shielded his eyes from the sunlight, taking notice of a fresh dandelion that poked out from the grass. He stepped off the stoop to pluck it, but was distracted by the moving truck that pulled up in front of the house across the street.

Out of the truck came a young family; a man, a wife holding a baby, and a boy who clutched a toy plane in his hands. The boy made plane sounds, bomb sounds, angry sounds. Frederick clutched at the dog tags he still hadn't removed since his return from the war. He retreated, taking refuge at the kitchen table, where Julia placed a fresh crêpe covered in icing sugar.

"It's almost as sweet as you," she said.

He felt the warmth of her smile, but scratched at the itch on his neck.

"What's wrong, Fred?"

"Just a mosquito bite," he said, picking up his fork.



Frederick spent most of summer's twilight working on the lawn. Sometimes the mosquitoes bothered him, but he paid them no mind as he dug the weeds from the grass with a screwdriver. A set of erratic footsteps pattered across the street. Frederick looked up to see the boy from next door. He held the toy plane in one hand and a melting red popsicle in the other.

"My mom says you're a hero." The boy nodded at the dog tags that had slipped from beneath Frederick's collar.

Frederick crumpled the dandelion in his palm and stood. "Being a hero isn't what they say it is."

"I bet your wife thinks you're a hero," the boy said. "Your wife always goes for walks at night. It's so funny. Once, she even knocked on our door and she wasn't wearing anything!"

Frederick tucked the tags back where they belonged. He wiped his forehead, smearing the yellow guts of the dandelion on his face. "Dammit."

"Why do you need to pick them all?" the boy asked.

"They ruin the grass," Frederick said.

The boy shrugged. "But they make the grass prettier. The bees like them too."

Frederick wiped his shaking fingers on his leg. "The bees...they sound like the planes."

The boy studied his toy, confused.

"Things don't sound the same when you're a hero," Frederick explained.

"Oh," the boy said. He went to lick his popsicle, but the ice melted off the stick and landed in the grass.



At night, Frederick found Julia standing before the living room window, staring at the neighbor's house. She held a cushion to her face and sniffed. "I-I-I can't help it," she slurred, giggling as she bit into the velvet.

Frederick took a seat on the couch, but then Julia turned and gawked at him. She stood for a moment before carefully approaching, her sleeping gaze trying to make sense of him.

"You're different," she said, but she still slipped into his arms and back into slumber. Later, he woke to find the door wide open.

He darted outside and stalked the streets until he found her picking up stones in the neighbor's backyard.

"I want a popsicle too!" she cried.

Frederick guided her back to the house, trying not to wake her. Before locking the door, he turned back and saw the little boy watching from one of the windows. Frederick swallowed and helped Julia upstairs. Then the cries of the neighbor's baby slipped through their open bedroom window.

Julia smiled against his neck. "I want a baby, Fred. Let's have a baby." She curled herself against him and whimpered.

Frederick worked at a factory where he turned nitrogen into fertilizer instead of bombs. He often took home free bags, which he sprinkled over the lawn, hands shaking in hope that the dandelions wouldn't return.

"I finally met the neighbors today," Julia said, serving him meatloaf when he came in for dinner. "The mother was nice, but that baby was about the sweetest thing I've ever smelled."

Frederick cut a slice, but couldn't coax himself to take a bite.

"You talked to the boy the other day," Julia said.

"Yeah."

"He scared you, Fred. What did he do?"

Frederick shook his head. All he could think of was the injured men on the sand, crying for their mothers with their dying breaths. He'd fired his gun over and over, their sobs ringing forever in his ears. He wasn't a hero. He hung his head in shame, but Julia tucked fingers beneath his chin.

"Fred, tell me."

He swallowed. "I know I'm different now."

She shook her head. "You'll always be the same where it matters most, Fred." She pressed her hand to his chest, to his heart that beat against the metal dog tags. She held them through the thin fabric of his shirt. "You're a hero to me. I can do the same for you, baby."

Frederick went to scratch the mosquito bite, but Julia stopped him.

"I made lemon meringue pie for dessert," she said.



Days later, Frederick returned from work to find the boy running through the lawn. He no longer had the plane, just a fistful of dandelions gone to seed. The seeds spilled over his pristine lawn of green. The boy still made his plane sounds, his bomb sounds, his joyful sounds. Frederick slipped back against the car, unable to breathe. His shaking hand felt for the tags that identified him. He clutched the heated metal, hearing gunshots, hearing the ocean. He closed his eyes and thought of red, of victory, of Julia's lips, her teeth covered with red.

He gasped and tasted salt.

The front door opened. Julia came running, and she grabbed the boy by the ear. "You rotten child!"

The boy flailed and landed on the sidewalk, scraping his knee. Julia shielded her eyes from the sun and dragged the boy back toward his house, shoving him at the door. The mother answered, but Frederick couldn't hear what Julia said, what the mother said. He just heard the boy crying, the soldiers crying, until Julia's red smile revived him.

She made him pancakes for dinner and he sat at the table, unable to do anything but scratch the itch on his neck.

"It's okay, baby," she said, rubbing calamine lotion over the bite, her touch warm and soothing.

Frederick picked up his fork and ate.

Frederick woke up scratching his neck again but he gasped, relieved that Julia was still in the room with him. She straddled him, her face popsicle-red. She pushed his shoulders back against the mattress. Through the open window, he heard the baby crying for its mother.

"I can't help it!" she giggled. "I want one. I just want a baby so bad!"

Frederick tried to sit up, but she shoved him back down on the sand. The entire bed was drenched with sea water. He could smell the iron tanks, the metal of his gun. She laughed and grinned, revealing pointed teeth.

"You'll always be my hero, Fred." She kissed his neck and pulled him away from fear.

In the morning, Frederick stumbled down the stairs in a haze. Julia served him a fried banana sandwich for breakfast. Instead of eating it, Frederick scratched at the bandage on his neck.

"Don't," she said. "You'll make it worse."

He scratched again, knocking the chain of his dog tags. The metal peeled at the tape that held the bandage in place. He looked again at the sandwich, at the soft slices of yellow that were neatly laid atop the peanut butter, carefully fried to a golden yellow. Love. Warmth. Not cowardice, like he'd originally thought.

He removed the tags and placed them on the table.

"I'll give you a child, Julia. I know that's what you want."

"Really?" she asked.

Frederick took a bite and nodded. "I'd do anything for you, darling."

She straddled him in the night.

"I love you," Frederick said, but then he woke to an empty room. Outside, the neighbors screamed in commotion. The mother cried. The baby didn't. The dad threatened to beat the boy with his belt.

"She was naked!" the boy cried. "She was here!"

Frederick hurried downstairs and found Julia on the sofa, clutching not a pillow, but the baby. She whispered in its ear, but the baby was limp, its yellow sleeper drenched with blood. Julia slurped what was left and giggled. Frederick tried to wake her.

"Oh, Fred!" she said, smiling wider than she'd ever smiled before. "It tastes just like I hoped it would!"

"You're sleepwalking, Julia," he said, carefully taking the infant in his steady hands. He held its lifeless frame in his arms and guided Julia into the shower, where she washed the blood away. He got her into a new nightgown and coaxed her back to sleep.

"I love you," he said.

The little boy cried, trying to convince everyone around him that he wasn't crazy.

Frederick buried the dead baby beneath the compost in the backyard. Then he made a makeshift bed on the sofa, confident that his dear wife would soon put the poor boy out of his misery.



-Meet- Rebecca Jones-Howe



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

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ACROW'S
POEM

Upon tender stem
My vermilion bloom
Your aching evenfall
Permeating my wounds
I need your bloody kiss
And to feel the swoon
Our scarlet caress
To deathless tune
Endless as starlight
No night will consume
Lovers entwined in time
'Neath cherry blossom moon
For us
Forever
Will never be
Too soon

WRITTEN BY DAVID MIDDLEHAM



Poet Spotlight



DAVID MIDDLEHAM

Questions by Marie Casey

1. Tell us what you know about dreams.

I remember a quote from *The X-Files* I think it was something like; dreams are answers to questions we haven't worked out how to ask. I very rarely remember my dreams which makes me a bit sad, but I know I have them so I like to think my brain is working something out in there even if I'm destined to forget its method.

2. In a zombie apocalypse, what is your weapon of choice?

It depends if they're the sort of zombies that shuffle after you or the ones that can run. For the former, the romantic in me wants to say chainsaw but they're too cumbersome and impractical, so I think samurai sword. For the runners, crossbow, keep 'em at a distance.

3. Are you capable of finishing your cup of coffee or tea while it's still hot or do you allow it to cool and decide to reheat it 3-4 times?

In between; I don't tend to drink things while they're really hot, I'm a terrible human being and leave it until it's borderline tepid. If it does get cold, I'll just drink it rather than reheat it. Please don't hate me.

The Vampire of Lugnano



Written by Spyder Collins

I am so cold.

Then, I am always cold.

This chill is something more. Binding, perhaps... everlasting, yes. I feel like I am trapped in the arms of a stranger—an unwelcome feeling

of dread. I do understand my situation; there is no denying it. Still, this feeling causes deeper pain. The origin of the dread I am aware of, but I will face it. As I promised myself I would.

There is darkness too, and it is unbending. It surrounds me, skitters throughout, weaving a cocoon around me. Then there are the never-ending whispers from lips unseen. Speaking in tongues reserved for devils. Normally, I welcome the darkness. Light, whether of heart or physical, I find revolting. That is, except for the one I call *madre*. I miss her already, her delicate touch, both strong and warm.

The smell of rot overwhelms my senses. My nose drowns in it. I crinkle it at the bridge to try and restrict the airway. But I can hardly breathe anyway.

"The rot has taken to my eyes as well. They burn. I think to keep them shut, but it's too late now."

Do I really need to? I wonder. The rot has taken to my eyes as well. They burn. I think to keep them shut, but it's too late now. This creeping blight invades me, made worse by my heightened senses.

Silence, unnerving and final, hides within the darkness. It toys with the vileness of my situation and rides the back of the cold. It's there, I can sense it, this silence that mocks me. It has a face, a name, I know it. It is sinister and cunning; it slithers about like a heretic in church. It comes to me. It is in the darkness, the rot that taints my skin, and the cold that grips my spine. It harbors in this unbending darkness.



I came here without repudiation. Had I appreciated the extent of misery, the depth of loneliness, and endless longing my death would bring, I would have declined. But it's too late for second thoughts. The weight upon me is too great. I am weakened from malaria, and I will face my fate.

In the beginning, they accused my *madre* of witchcraft. An unwed peasant woman who, one night, came upon a child she claimed as her own. Later, the clergy declared her a worshipper of Satan. They implicated her in bringing the marauders who sacked the village, and left famine and malaria in their wake. Of course, neither was true. She was a simple woman. Her name was Giselle Cicarelli, and her only sin was loving a boy who had roamed this miserable earth for over four centuries.

She hid me, denied my existence, and did everything in her power to keep me from the prying eyes of the village. Then the day came when the clergy with their bibles, crosses, and holy water arrived at her door.

"He is a demon. In spite of our Father's love."

"He is just a boy," my *madre* pleaded.

"Not when he is unaffected by the plague that has taken so many of our blessed children."

She wept. For me, she wept. "He is a boy, no more."

"No, this is no boy."

They called me a vampire. It came to me that I was indeed just that. I have little memory of how it came to be. Or where I spent my years before I wandered. I was not always alone, though. There was another who led me. Trained me to survive and avoid the eyes of man. She deserted me, here, in Umbria.

This is where she found me, my *madre*.

She knew I was not an ordinary boy, but she turned a cheek to my odd characteristics and appetite. She was unable to bear a child, so I became hers. A scamp found in grape fields, abandoned by my maker. Perhaps she had grown bored of me?

The weathered taste of earth bitters my tongue. It's a flavor of ancient times, very unpleasant. I can taste my lineage. Years of vampires who roamed this God-forsaken earth. I may be a boy, but my years make me more than a simple child. I have seen much in my run of centuries. The death that rests in the soil of my tomb somehow reminds me of what I was and the years that escape me.

There is a pain in my jaw as well. My tongue pushes the dirt aside and drags the coarseness of the stone that gags me. My mouth remains open no matter how I try to close it. Perhaps to keep me from feeding on myself? I do not know this cruel rationale. Little do they realize, I cannot sustain myself on my own blood as none runs in my veins. Or perhaps they are simply merciless. These clergymen, men of God, carriers of the cloth. I was there when His son roamed these same lands.

I am struck with a deepening sadness. My *madre*, what of her? I submitted through the weakness of man's illness. Though it did not affect me like the others, it still took a great toll on me. Weakened from lack of substance, I feared I too would die. Certainly, I will now. Of all the ways for a vampire to die...I mean, will I?

I would cry, but I cannot. I feel the pangs of sorrow but, like my veins, my eyes are dry. *Madre*, I call to her in my lost thoughts. I can see her at dusk among the sunflowers that line the grape fields. Her smile is as bright as the sun. The only light I welcome. The only light I will miss. I am lost to this darkness that is unbending.



She was a good woman. Minus the God-fearing. I could hear her weep as the clergy sealed my fate. I, sick with malaria. Not like the other children. The disease didn't ravage me. *Madre* told me tales of their suffering with fever, severe vomiting, and aches. It looked much like I imagined death would.

"You are lucky, Cyrus. You are not like other children."

I had seen them. Those who died at night and were marched through the streets to wails of anguish by sorrow-stricken villagers. I drew stern and hateful looks, but my *madre* insisted we pay our respects as the soul was taken to the cemetery. I didn't agree with it. Somehow, I was lucky.

I am certain, for those children; their death was miserable. For me? It was simply decay. My teeth slowly infected and fell from my mouth. This made it impossible for me to feed.

In time, I grew weak. *Madre* would bring me blood from cows. I needed to feed, not like a spoon-fed child. Rather, like the animal I was. To sink my teeth into flesh. This worried *madre*, my state. She refrained from calling the physician until she felt there was no other option. It was the beginning of talk and fear. The physician would not come any more, as he was terrified of me, for good cause.

It wasn't long before the clergy returned. They carried me draped in a robe along the same road the dead children were carefully and lovingly paraded. There was no one lining the road for me. No weeping villagers, no one else. Just the violence from the clergy and the weeping song of my *madre*.

Large, harsh hands gripped me by the nape of my neck. The rough material of the robe scratched at my skin and fingers dug into me. My bare feet scraped the cobblestone road, wearing the flesh to bone until "clickety-click" echoed into the unfolding eve.

Once at the cemetery of babies, one of the clergymen shoved a stone into my mouth. The sound of it echoed horribly in my skull, and the force dislodged several decaying teeth. I choked on them, as I had no choice but to swallow them. Then I felt a breath of air as my body fell into a freshly-dug grave. No sooner did I peer upward than dirt fell over my face like waves crashing upon a shore.



Dirt constricts me. Its weight has drained my lungs. I have tried to move, but it's no use. Entombed in Holy ground, my bones will one day be uncovered, my acrimony set free. I'd rather lie here for an eternity than witness them burn my *madre* in the village center. No, this is far less cruel. She will get over her mourning in time.

Here I will die, again. The weight of His earth has cracked my ribs and broken my arms and legs. They will heal themselves only to break again, and again. Eventually, my mind will weaken, and I will slip into insanity. Perhaps a broken rib will pierce my heart, or perhaps starvation will take me. I cannot suffocate, nor take myself to Hell. I know not what I can do. Except wait.

As I lie here in this hallowed grave, I can all but see the one who turned me. A lonely woman, much like my *madre*. She had cruel features and lacked patience with me. Yes, she became bored with me. An endless ten-year-old, four-hundred years in the making. She still lives; I can sense her as I lie in my grave. But I know she will not come for me. How is it that I can see this so clearly now?

As for my *madre*, she will grow old, feeble. Isolated by the clergy and the ignorance of the village. This realization is maddening. I would have cared for her until her last breath, then carried her into the woods and buried her among her beloved sunflowers.

Madre...

I could have been a good son.





Written by Han Adcock

Ama Cross was exactly what Finchley expected. A shy, unassuming woman with flyaway tendrils of dark hair escaping from a ponytail, an earnest face, and glasses. Centuries of existence gave him experience in name-face correlation.

Finchley estimated he was not what Ama expected. He was a tall, spindly man with a willow's grace and the bearing of a melancholy king. Pewter hair, not blond, which needed a cut. His skin tended to startle people, and so did his eyes.

"It must be difficult," she said, after introductions were made. "Being an albino."

"That is the least of my problems."

"Why?"

"What is inside is what matters."

"Are you ill?"

"That is impossible." Finchley did not look at her, his gaze travelling around the flat. "Where is the soul?"

"He dipped the knife into his forearm, the skin yielding like water, without pain. A small, bloodless gash resealed itself as if it had never happened."

"It's mine," Ama said. "I mean, it's in me. In here." She patted her torso.

"What does it look like? Not that appearance matters."

"I don't know."

"What does your soul do?"

She faltered, clearly unnerved. "Well...it lives inside me, mostly. It keeps me alive."

"Your respiratory system, digestive tract, and your nervous and limbic systems are the things that keep you alive. What else does it do?"

"It helps me think—"

Finchley held up a hand. "Your brain is the organ of thought."

She sagged. "I'll be honest with you. My soul is different from other people's. It doesn't always stay inside. It wanders—well, I wander—into the otherworld."

Something kindled in his brain. "The otherworld?"

"Where you go when you die, or in dreams."

"Is it like Heaven?"

"It's different for different people. More like Hell for me."

"Ah. You are selling your soul because it malfunctions?"

"Sort of."

He supposed Ama expected him to be angry, but he refused to react. She told him of a meeting she had, in the otherworld, with a dying soul-merchant, and the bargain they had struck: to repair her soul, she had to sell it to someone who would give him blood.

"I am willing to go. I possess no blood—"

"What d'you mean, 'no blood'? You're anaemic?"

Finchley walked into Ama's kitchenette, took a knife from the drawer, and stood before her.

"W-w-what...?"

"Watch." He dipped the knife into his forearm, the skin yielding like water, without pain.

Ama bit her lip, her eyes widening as he calmly took the knife away. A small, bloodless gash resealed itself as if it had never happened.

She backed away. "You're dead. You're not breathing—in all the time we've spoken—no breath. My God... How did I not notice?"

"Do not be frightened of me," he said. "I was born with a congenital defect—I am the only known case. I have no discernible organs, pulse, or bones, though I am solid. Scans show nothing. I have existed in this way for several centuries. I cannot die, but I am not a vampire. I promise. Darkness lives inside me—it terrified me as a child. I would panic, thinking I was bleeding black blood, that I was drowning in it... One evening, my father took me to one side and opened the back of my hand with a knife. Nothing emerged. I feel nothing...but I need a soul."

Ama remained frozen.

Finchley gently prised the paper, with the address of the soul-merchant written upon it, from her clenched fingers.



In Calais, Finchley found a rundown hovel. A man lay in the dark, alone and unaware. Nobody watched over him.

“Hello?”

The figure in the bed stirred.

“I do not know if you can hear me,” Finchley said. “Do you understand me?”

The figure grunted, “Yes.”

Finchley came closer, looking into the man’s eyes. “Are you Ama Cross’s soul-merchant?”

“Yes. Do you...have...?”

“I want a soul. In return, I agree to grant you life. What I have inside me is not blood. It is nothing, only purest darkness. If you are the creature I think you to be, then drinking my darkness would be better than draining someone’s blood. My essence has never run out, whatever it may be.”

“How long have you lived?”

“Two thousand, six hundred and seventy-seven years, nine months, three weeks, and one day.”

“I’ll take it,” the soul-merchant rasped. “Whatever you’ve got.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Put your neck to my lips. I can’t sit up. There...may be pain.”

“I do not know what pain is.” Finchley rolled down his collar and leaned over the soul-merchant.

At first, he felt nothing. It was the knife-through-the-skin trick again. Then a cowardly sensation began—a faint niggle in the back of his mind that something was wrong, an itch he couldn’t pinpoint. It magnified a hundredfold and pounced, like nothing he had ever experienced. It was exhausting, filling him with disgust mingled with hatred, when he realised he was feeling, and had to resist the urge to bolt out of the door. It was his childhood fear of the dark come true; his darkness was seeping into an unknown source, and he could not see how much was escaping.

The soul-merchant released a satiated sigh. “Thank you.”

Finchley said nothing. He stared at the soul-merchant’s bright, unblinking eyes, clutching his jugular. It was whole and undamaged, but he felt unclean, as if insects swarmed all over him.

“What have you done?”

"I partook of your soul."

"I have none."

"You think a soul is visible to the naked eye? You had one all along."

"Then why can I not feel?"

"Oh, but you have. You haven't allowed yourself to feel, silly boy, since your father cut you. It was the only way for you to deal with your fear."

Finchley's knees turned to rubber. He sank onto the bed.

"How much did you drink?"

"Enough to last me two thousand, six hundred years. I am not a soul-merchant, Mr. Finchley. There is no such thing. I am a Soulbreaker."

"You tricked me. You tricked Ama. All you wanted was someone to feed on. You were not going to help her at all. I...I hate you."

"You'll recover."

"But will I be the same?"

"Everyone has to change."

"Will I?"

The Soulbreaker's self-satisfied smile increased in width until its mouth peeled from its teeth, which grew in length, puncturing its gums, tearing its lips. Black ichor dripped down its chin. To Finchley, it now looked vaguely silly, like a sabre-toothed gorilla wearing a business suit.

"I have one half of your soul, and one half of your life," the Soulbreaker hissed in a new, less pleasant timbre of voice. "You'll be weaker. You'll die earlier. Is that what you needed to know?"

Finchley rose, the room swaying. "I shall leave you and yours alone, if you leave me and mine alone."

"You have no one," the Soulbreaker jeered. "Apart from Ama. She likes you, despite the fact you frighten her. I fancy I'll be around at least two thousand, seven hundred years. Why don't we both go to meet her?"

Spines erupted through the back of the Soulbreaker's suit as it hurled itself at him and clung tightly to his back, like a perverse form of rucksack.

"Walk!" it barked into his ear.

"What if I don't want to?"

"I'm sure you'd like me to drain you again. Perhaps any sensation is better than none? No? Get moving. If you think about approaching anyone for help, you'll be sorry."

Finchley carried the parasite on his back into the sea, hoping that if he did the backstroke, it would fall off and drown. No luck came from that quarter. Like him, the Soulbreaker did not breathe. All it did was lose its temper and kick him until they reached England.

Dripping seawater, the Soulbearer ordered Finchley to a halt in the corridor outside Ama's flat.

"What now?" Finchley asked. He had tried slamming the creature into walls on his way up, but it clung like a limpet.

"This'll be fun," the Soulbearer tittered. "For me. I shall render myself invisible. You will go in, leaving the door open, and tell her exactly what happened to you, minus the part about me, shall we say, cadging a lift from you. I want to see her reaction."

"Why?"

"I like making people suffer."

"To what purpose?"

"I hate humankind. She will feel pity for you and I will reveal myself to her in my 'human' aspect, with an offer she can't refuse."

"What would that be?"

"None of your business. March!"

Finchley pressed the buzzer. The door opened to reveal Ama Cross, looking smaller and more earnest than ever.

"You're dripping wet!" She removed a length of seaweed from his hair with lightly trembling fingers. "Did it work?"

"Yes and no." Finchley winced as the invisible Soulbearer dug a heel into his ribs. "He's here, but invisible. On my back."

"TRAITOR!" the Soulbearer screeched in his ear, drumming on Finchley's head with angry fists. "How can you betray half your own soul?"

Ama stared at Finchley reacting to the blows, her hands covering her mouth.

His skin erupted into goose pimples, a wave of nausea hitting him as the thing on his back fastened its mouth to the side of his neck.

"Do something!" he roared at Ama, who vanished back into her flat.

So this is it, Finchley thought to himself. This was the end. Curiosity had finally killed the two-thousand-year-old cat. He closed his eyes...



...and opened them to find Ama standing over him, breathless, holding a wooden chair by the leg and looking doubtful.

A wooden chair?

He sat up. A great load had been taken from his shoulders. It lay unconscious on the corridor carpet tiles, a huddled, leathery, spiny thing, rapidly dissolving in a pool of its own bodily fluids. The smell was aggressive.

"You killed it with a chair?" Finchley asked in disbelief. His head ached, which was wrong for him.

“Sort of. As I hit it with the chair, I left my body and hit the thing over the head in the otherworld. Brained it with a lump of ecto-boulder.”

Finchley had no idea what an ecto-boulder was. He had no wish to know.

“Leave it there.” She led him into her flat. “I’ll get rid of it later.”

Walking was difficult. Every joint creaked. The top of Finchley’s head felt as if it would fall off. With Ama’s help, he laid on the couch.

“Am I going to die?” he asked.

She took a shuddering breath, feeling his brow. “I think so. You look...flimsy.”

“I am sorry,” he murmured. “I was cold with you earlier. The Soulbr—the vampire—the vampire told me—”

“Shush. The reason you’re dying is because your soul was split, and the other half of it died with that thing. I want to help.”

Finchley stared. He now understood what the Soulbreaker meant by “an offer she can’t refuse.” It knew she would pity him and do something self-sacrificing, which was precisely what he didn’t want Ama to do. She was a kind, intelligent person. She did not deserve to die early. He had lived long enough. She was a child in comparison.

“Don’t,” he said.

“It won’t hurt. I know what you’re thinking. It won’t hurt me. Think about it.” She laid next to him. “If I’m able to let my soul leave my body, it must be stronger than most people’s. Strong enough to share with you. I can control when it goes. Which means...”

Finchley understood as Ama pressed her front against his and locked their mouths together. Life flooded through him, then she pulled away.

He had his first smile.



-Street- Han Adcock



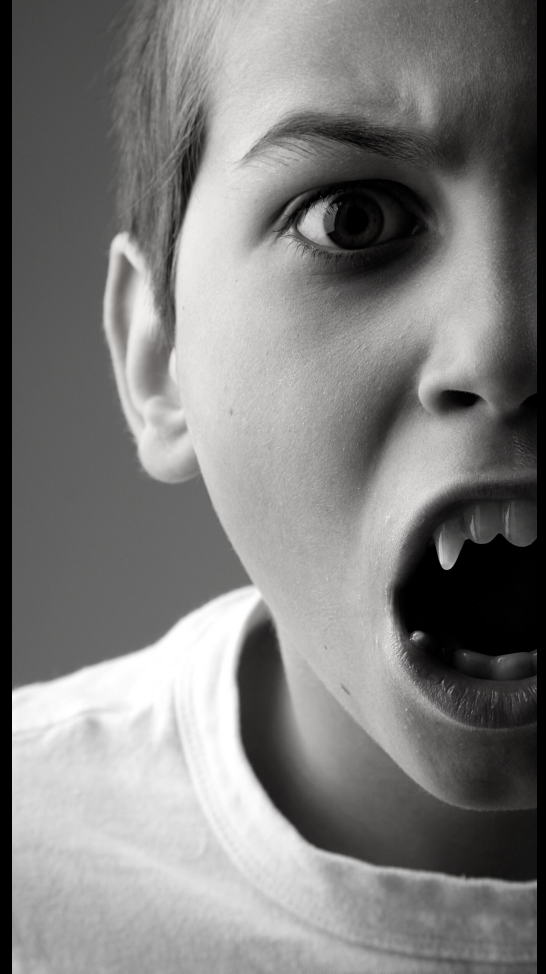
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Playing God



Written by Lucas Mann

The door creaked, breaking the silence. Vincent looked up to see Dianna peering through the doorway. She was mostly hidden behind the door, her fingers wrapped around its edge, ready to pull it shut.

"Is he sedated?" she asked.

"For now," Vincent replied. "It took more than expected. But I think it'll do the job."

"Are you sure?"

"I have to be." He tipped a vial upside down, showing that it was empty. "I'm all out."

She descended the stairs to the cellar slowly, each step creaking as it bore her weight, her eyes never leaving the nude male lying on the table. He was perfectly still, void of any sign of life. His chest did not rise and fall, his gray eyes staring lifelessly at the crossbeam above him. Chains large enough to restrain a bear wrapped around his torso, arms, and legs. The smell of mildew filled the air, along with the lingering burn of evaporated chemicals.

"I believe he steals energy from his environment. I am often quite tired and find it difficult to concentrate down here. When he is awake, I cannot keep a candle lit."

“Were you able to isolate the compound?”

He nodded, the corner of his lip curling into a smile. “I did.”

“And subdue the side effects?”

“Go check Shuck.”

“You’re experimenting on the dog now?”

“I ran out of other test subjects.” He glanced over at a pile of carcasses. Multiple rats, a few squirrels, and even a rabbit spilled out of the burlap sack, waiting to be disposed of.

She walked to the corner of the room where the dog lay sleeping. “Is it safe?”

Vincent shrugged, then laughed. “He has shown no signs of aggression.”

Dianna knelt next to the dog, running her fingers through his long, black fur, down across his ribs to rest over his heart. She lingered there for some time, before looking back at Vincent with concern. “He has no heartbeat.”

“Just wait.” Vincent held two vials in his hand, one containing a scarlet liquid, the other black. He swirled the latter over the flame of a candle until it began to boil, then he poured it into the other, the two liquids combining to become a rich, burgundy color.

“What am I waiting for? It seems you’ve killed the—oh!” She jumped back, pulling her hand away from the dog. “It felt like it was bursting out of his chest!”

“I was also startled at first. It’s amazing how powerful it feels, yet if you put your ear to it, there is no sound.”

“Is it the same with him?” She nodded at the man on the table.

“It is. Though I dare not linger near him for too long. Those shackles are mostly for show. If he wanted, he could tear through them as if they were made of parchment.”

She took a step closer to the man. He was a perfect physical specimen, the lines of each muscle visible as they aligned under his skin. Vincent approached her, the flame of the candle he was carrying caused shadows to slink across the room.

“How long have you had him here?”

“Two or three months.”

“How does he survive without feeding?”

“I don’t know, but I have a theory.”

“You have a theory about everything.”

“That is true.” Vincent laughed. “I believe he steals energy from his environment. I am often quite tired and find it difficult to concentrate down here. When he is awake, I cannot keep a candle lit.”

“He absorbs the energy from fire?”

Vincent shrugged. “Just a theory. But I don’t know what else extinguishes it.”

She looked down at the candle, watching its flame hovering above it. Returning her gaze to the man, she pondered his theory when the room suddenly went dark. Pounding footsteps echoed across the floor, followed by the crash of metal and what sounded like a body

crumpling in front of her. Something landed on her foot. She reached down to brush it away, but shrieked as the fingers of a human hand intertwined with hers. She fell backwards and scurried away on the dirt floor, kicking at the hand. She bumped into something solid and froze, terrified of what lurked in the darkness. Wanting to call out for Vincent, but afraid to give her position away, her panic was interrupted by the sound of laughter. Laughter that sounded very much like Vincent's.

A light appeared in the darkness as the candle illuminated the room once more. The gurney was overturned and the sedated man was on the floor a few feet from her. Vincent was laughing so hard he fell into the chair at his desk.

"Did...what the..." she stuttered as realization of his prank set in. "Are you kidding me?"

Vincent roared with laughter.

"You're unbelievable!"

"I know," he managed between laughs. "I'm sorry."

"Someday your apologies won't be enough to keep me around." She pointed at the body on the floor. "What about your test subject? What if you hurt him?"

Vincent waved his hand in front of him. "You don't need to worry about him. He perished this morning."

"You killed him?"

"Technically he was already dead, but yes." He composed himself. "It's of no concern. We have what we need." He stood and gestured toward the stairs. "Come. We should summon Elias."



Vincent circled the kitchen, waiting for their son to join them. Stopping to stare out the window, he took a deep breath of autumnal air. Its chill filled his lungs and he reveled in it, knowing that one way or another, their time of necessity would soon end.

Dianna pulled two glasses from the cabinet as Elias entered. They sat in their customary places and she placed a glass in front of both Vincent and Elias. Vincent sat, running his fingers along the grain of the oak table, up to a wine bottle that had been waiting for them. The cork popped open easily, the sound reverberating around the room.

"Such sweet music," Vincent said. "Like the beginning of a symphonic masterpiece."

"Is there an occasion I'm forgetting?" Elias asked.

"You have forgotten nothing." Vincent poured the burgundy liquid evenly into the glasses. "This is not exactly a celebration. More of a transformation." He glanced over at Dianna, giving her a grim smile.

Elias followed his eyes and scowled. "None for Mother?"

Dianna placed her hand on his wrist. "Let him explain."

Vincent blew out a breath of air. "You know of the persecution we face. We have been

hunted and have been forced to live in hiding since you were a young child. The need for that has come to an end.”

“Are we going to fight?” Elias leaned forward, eyes full of vigor.

“It will likely come to that.” Vincent leaned back and folded his arms. “But only as a last resort. We do not wish for anyone to die. I have made a discovery. One that will prevent them from killing us.”

“Blackmail?” Elias asked. “Have you found proof of the Queen’s adultery?”

“Information such as that would only get us killed sooner.” Vincent swirled the liquid in his glass. “I have been experimenting. This will sound ridiculous, but I found an elixir that will give us unlimited strength and bring us immortality.”

Elias snorted, turning to Dianna and shaking his head. “This is another one of your pranks.”

“It is not a prank.” Vincent’s face was expressionless. “Let me prove it to you.” He turned to the open cellar door and whistled. “Shuck! Here, boy!” Almost immediately the dog padded through the doorway, joining Vincent at his side.

“Was he just waiting there?” Elias asked.

“No.” Vincent shook his head. “He was my first successful test subject. It has given him unparalleled speed. His intelligence has also increased. He can now understand everything in our language.” Vincent held eye contact with Elias. “Name something that you know to be in your room.”

“My journal is at my bedside.”

“Shuck. Retrieve Elias’s journal.”

In a flash he was gone, returning just as quickly, carrying a leather-bound journal in his mouth. He stopped next to Vincent, opening his mouth slightly to offer it to him. Vincent took and set it on the table.

“Is this the one?”

Elias nodded slowly, still unsure what to believe. “What’s the catch?”

“I don’t believe there to be one.” Vincent stood and began pacing the room. “The creature I derived this from had violent tendencies. But I was able to differentiate between the compounds that made him violent and those that gave him strength and immortality. Shuck has shown no tendencies toward violence. He has all the positive qualities without the danger.”

“Sounds too good to be true.” Elias scowled. “Why doesn’t Mother get any? Why just us?”

“Unfortunately, it has to be consumed in an exact quantity. This was all I could produce. After we partake, I intend to create more from my own blood. Then she can indulge.”

“The monarchy is only targeting males,” Dianna said. “It is more important for you to change first. By taking it yourself, you can protect me.”

“I’m in.” Elias grabbed his glass and poured it into his mouth, swallowing it in one gulp.

“That was a quick change of heart,” Vincent said, eyeing him with curiosity.

Elias shrugged. "I figure if it is a prank, you wouldn't do anything to harm us. If it isn't, I'm a god."

Vincent watched him carefully, then drank from his own glass, albeit much slower.

"How long does it take?" Elias asked.

"Shouldn't be long at all." Vincent watched him closely, looking for signs only he knew.

Elias's jaw worked as he opened and closed it. "My mouth is so dry." He looked up at Vincent with eyes as black as the night sky. "Father. What have you done?"

Lifting his nose in the air, he inhaled deeply, knuckles turning white as he gripped the arms of the chair. He turned to Dianna, his face a combination of confusion and bloodlust. He grabbed her by the hair and violently jerked her head back.

"No!" Vincent roared as he launched himself over the table, tackling Elias to the floor. "You must control yourself!"

A blond chunk of hair that used to be attached to Dianna's head whipped Vincent across the face as Elias's fist collided with his cheek. The force of the blow sent Vincent crashing into the table, splinters of oak shooting across the room. In a second, Vincent was back on his feet and hurled what was left of the table at Elias. It had no effect, shattering as it struck, sending more shards flying through the air, some lodging in the wall.

"Don't touch her," Vincent growled.

"I don't want to," Elias panted. "But I need to." He turned back to Dianna, opening his mouth to reveal two fangs protruding from his upper jaw.

"Elias! Don't do this!" Vincent pleaded, but his son ignored him, taking a step toward Dianna.

Vincent lunged, shoving him away and into the wall. Elias's eyes went wide and he looked down at his chest. He reached up, his hand running over the spike of wood embedded in the wall, now impaling him. Surprise registered on his face at the sight of the burgundy stains on his fingers. He closed his eyes for a long moment. When he opened them again, the black had faded, empty of the bloodlust that just consumed them.

"Father?"

Vincent stared in disbelief at his son, unable to find words to respond.

"This was the worst prank ever." Elias's eyes closed for the final time, his body slumping along with them.

Vincent rushed to him, dropping to his knees. He took Elias's hand in his and held it to his face. His eyes flooded with tears as the agony swelled inside of him. He let out a guttural scream, the only way he could express how horribly wrong this had gone.

When he stopped, he heard Dianna whimpering. Elias's blood smeared across his face, he turned to see her sitting against the wall. Her mouth was agape at the sight; her only son, dead at the hand of her husband. She held the side of her head against the spot that used to be covered with hair, now matted with blood and patches of remaining skin.

“I’m sorry.” The words barely escaped his lips. He drew in a breath, attempting to say more, but when he did, the scent of Dianna’s blood infiltrated his nose, flooding his hyperactive olfactory senses.

The lust that had overwhelmed Elias now had its hold on him.

“I’m so sorry...”



-Street- Lucas Mann



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

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Acknowledgements

We are so grateful for the stories written by our talented authors and the powerful poetry submitted by the Dark Poet Society for this month's spotlights.

We are continuously grateful to the entire Crow Family for their support and enthusiasm.

I would like to congratulate the authors selected from submissions. In the sea of short story submissions, yours breached the surface like humpback whales. I was honored to select them and place them in the magazine.

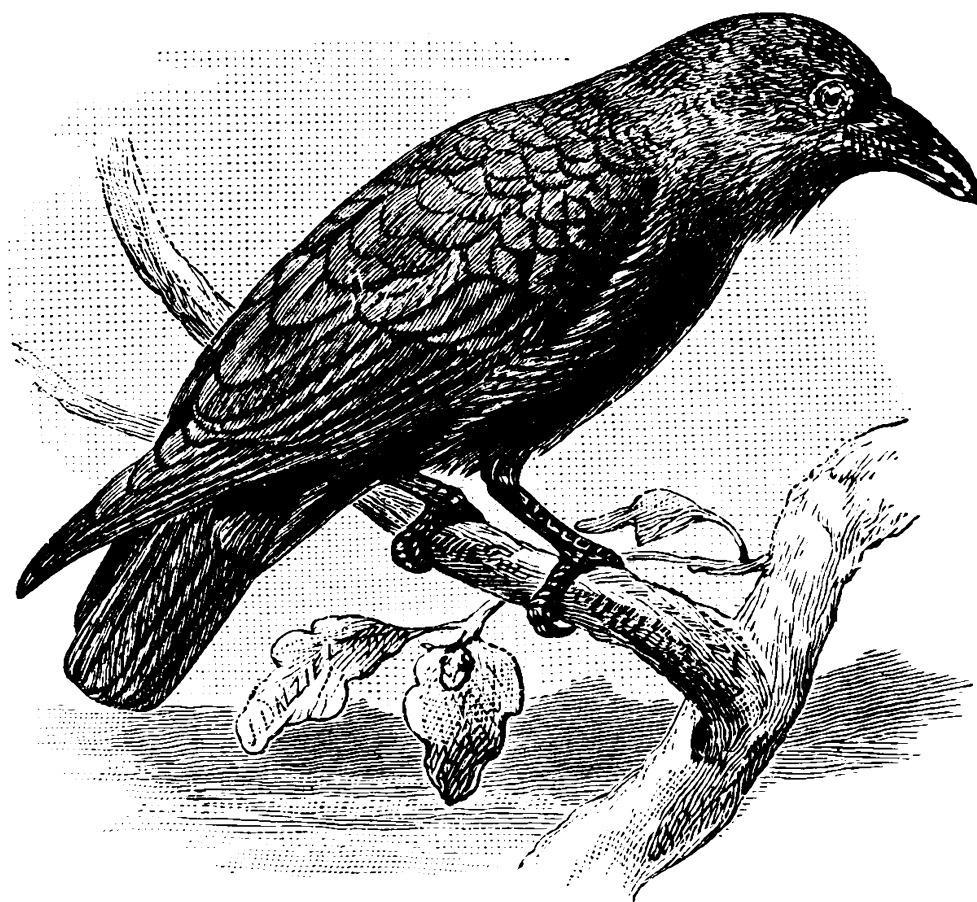
This issue was a ton of fun to put together and we are excited for the next one! If you are interested in seeing your own short story in The Crow's Quill, please submit on our website: <https://www.quillandcrowpublishinghouse.com/cqmagazine>

I'd love to take a look.

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

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

A special thank you to K.R. Wieland and Damon Barret Roe for their crow-eye editing assistance.



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