

EXOTIC GOTHIC

For lovely Katie and my tiny ballerinas, Emily and Juliana.

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Morris and Olga Olson, and Christopher and Barbara Roden
for their kind help and encouragement.

To all of the writers here, thanks for e-mailing back with ‘How can I say no?’

EXOTIC GOTHIC
FORBIDDEN TALES
FROM OUR GOTHIC WORLD

Edited by
Danel Olson

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PREFACE

The Gothic Takes a Holiday

It took me a long time to realize why I liked them . . . Gothic tales . . . that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious—mirrors, the externalized self, forsaken castles, haunted forests, forbidden sexual objects . . . incest and cannibalism. . . . It was like waking up, it was a rude awakening: We live in Gothic times.

Angela Carter, Appendix to *Fireworks*

WHEREVER YOU GO, YOU CAN'T ESCAPE IT . . . This menacing truth in Gothic literature exists in the collection you now cradle. You will not be safe here as you roam from the anthology's departure point in Tanzania, to Zanzibar, Mali, Sumatra, Japan, Iraq, Russia, Australia, England, Scotland, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, America, and Canada. The uncanny is everywhere. At each place the Gothic mutates, flowers, and is put around your neck like some soft, scented, but topically poisonous lei. Isn't that the attraction? This genre will always repulse in the same breath it attracts and infects. That is its beautiful perversity. Is not the reader a willing Gothic victim, too? You can put the book down, condemn its acts, push away its fears, but with you it will stay, to be picked up again. You are not alone. The victims in these contemporary stories from around the world are willing participants in their victimisation, too. They are not deceived, they deceive themselves, just as they did in the oldest tales in Gothic existence.

So many books have featured this dark form so well, it may seem hard to justify another even if its new focus is *the exotic*. To many standout collections, *Exotic Gothic* owes a nod. There are anthologies that shock, titillate, and awaken you, reigniting the imagination's midnight fires. There are anthologies that change how you teach. The following have done all that for me: *American Gothic Tales*, *Gathering the Bones*, *I Shudder at Your Touch*, *Stranger: Dark Tales of Eerie Encounters*, *The Best of Cemetery Dance*, *Graven Images*, *The Darkest Thirst*, *Gothic!*, *Gothic Ghosts*, *The New Gothic*, *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, *The Big Book of Erotic Ghost Stories*,

Midnight Never Comes, Shadows and Silence, Acquainted with the Night, and At Ease with the Dead. To the brilliantly imaginative collections from Ellen Datlow and Terry Windling (and now Kelly Link and Gavin J. Grant), too many to name and over so many years, goes my gratitude.

Still, the question hasn't been asked before in a collection: how are international gothicists reimagining the traditional setting, mood, characters, class and inheritance conflicts, sexual tension, curses, and resolutions of the original British/German/French Gothic? How does the contemporary global Gothic enlarge, transcend, scramble, subvert, or mock the genre? Flowers bloom in different sizes and colours in different soil, and so may the Gothic's black rose change in the humus of a new culture and language. When the dark seed travels and finds home in all these distant lands, who knows how it grows? What new disease and hunger, terror and rage, taboo and weird dalliances? As editor, I have been a patient gardener, waiting and encouraging each petal to unfold, finding that some only perfumed and bloomed in the night. This book is the strange bouquet I give you.

As I invited each writer to add a flower, I found some surprises. First, authors like to break bread with the dead. In joining this ghost chase, how many times did they write me invoking their influences, sharing their continued conversation with past masters? I watched as the writers worked out the most difficult story movements like a call to the spirits, like finding a groom for the waiting corpse bride. Read carefully and you might sense the never-ending conversation living artists have with their predecessors, the whispers they exchange over Gothic's family trouble and secrets, desires to control, distorted perceptions, folklore and superstition resurrected, and sex that seems a parody of crime. Look, and just behind the contributors you can make out the ghosts of grimscribes leaning in with a steady murmur: Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, Lovecraft, Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor, Nabokov, Gogol, Bulgakov, de Maupassant, Kafka, Robertson Davies, Stoker, the Brontës, Fowles, Carter, Ewers, Carpentier, Cortázar, Borges, Horacio Quiroga, Dinesen, Hedayat, Patrick White, Akinari, and Kyoka. They all hover over the Table of Contents. Only their tombstones say these makers are really dead.

Will we ever banish their old Gothic fears of those cruel ones who were a law unto themselves? Namely the French and Spanish priests, English dukes, German barons, Italian counts, and Flemish anatomists who got a little practice on their wives. The second surprise and answer from my reading of this book, is No. The old villains still rent space in our imaginations, but they come to us in new masquerade. Most unsettling is the fact that real cases sometimes inspired these stories, giving lie to the pledge that 'any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental'. Any day we can read in a newspaper how the powerful, cloaked in respectability and shielded by a bureaucratic buttress, can torture us as mercilessly as any seething master in a Gothic tale.* The new arrogant monsters appear in real

* Consider what was done to Briana Lane, age 22 and unemployed, her skull removed at the University of Utah after an auto accident. Because putting her skull back in place was not technically defined as an emergency, it was delayed by negotiations over cost. The skull remained in a freezer for three months, with Lane battling serious pain the whole time, feeling her brain shifting on her. Meanwhile, the state Medicaid office demurred that they only paid for long-term 'disabilities'. The hospital gave her a street hockey helmet to wear for protection, causing Lane to quip, 'You'd think they could give me something more protective. Like a skull, perhaps.' Her skull was finally reattached four months later ('I lived without part of my skull', *BBC News Online*, 12 May 2004).

life with a thousand faces perched high among the political and the corporate, the medical and the military. We can look abroad to Afghanistan and Iraq and Cuba, or we can settle our eyes on the American shore. Though gone now, Angela Carter's words still pulse: 'We live in Gothic times.'

John Bushore, Farnoosh Moshiri, and Brian Hodge illuminate the horrors done in the names of these paramilitaries, agencies, and states. The worry that we are ruled by forces beyond the law and the people's will has not gone away. This is the Gothic fear and challenge: if we remain forever cautious towards these crushing elites, can we remain human or do we become bugs? But it would be simple-minded to say the Gothic is only without. It is within us. Like seeds in an Egyptian tomb, still ready to germinate 4000 years after collection, the extremes of all human experience patiently lie in us. What is more horrible in Horror than the recognition we too could do these acts? Around the world, this recognition of our Gothic possibilities is memorably recounted. *Look into the eyes of the Djinn*, the Moroccan proverb vows, *and stare into the depths of your own soul*. Or a continent away in Russia, Solzhenitsyn mused in *The Gulag Archipelago*, 'If only there were evil people somewhere committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?'

Sometimes we have to ask another to be the destroyer of our hearts, as in William F. Nolan's original Edinburgh castle and cave discovery. At other times no one is really asked to slay our hearts, but the job gets done anyhow, finished by the hand of fate, occult forces, ancient ones, Karma, or our own unconscious and *thanatos*. Who really knows? As Nolan's friend Rod Serling used to intone, 'This highway leads to the shadowy tip of reality . . .' Nodding to *The Twilight Zone*, David Wellington speeds his characters down occupied Baghdad's streets and desert roads to an unseen destination.

The enigma over who is victim and who is victimiser expands in fresh tales from Lucy Taylor, Terry Dowling, Steve Rasnic Tem, and James Cortese. Which one is the beast in these stories? It seems the only thing worse than meeting a vampire (either the physical or the psychic) is not meeting one. And below Solzhenitsyn's 'line dividing . . . the heart', bleed the most unrestrained longings and mordlust in reprinted works from Nicholas Royle, Kyle Marffin, Ilsa J. Bick, and Joyce Carol Oates. In their works, it is as if the most terrible thing is total human freedom. Beyond the storms of the heart are the memories and paranoias of the mind, effectively preying on characters imagined by Thomas Tessier, Peter Crowther, Douglas Unger, and Thomas Ligotti. The most precious Gothic delusion is that a place can become a person or trap a spirit, as in Barbara Roden's new story or Sean Meriwether's republished tale of ghostly love.

Revenge, colder than any German night, consumes both protagonist and villains within Nancy A. Collins's Southern Gothic novella, though avenging oneself can be funny, too, as in Mark Steensland and Rick Hautala's pillow tribute to Lovecraft. Black humour and Gothic parody bustle wildly together and jump at us when characters get what they want in Neil Gaiman's and T. C. Boyle's tales. If ever we needed proof of Thomas Ligotti's observation in an email to me, that 'there's a humor that makes the blackness blacker still', we now have it.

Along with authoritarian personalities and occasional gallows wit, the Gothic must have a secret lover, whether it be man, woman, or Death. For to live is to desire wildly, and everything in the Gothic is alive, even dead things. ‘Hold me, kiss me, do what you want with me’ is still the chant to the beloved two hundred years since its conception, and you will hear it now. Matthew Lewis’s clumsy, sometimes unreadable, yet blockbuster novel *The Monk* (1796) may be the best example yet of a Gothic sexual volcano, and the lava is still hot. A genre that has always fixated on natural sublimates and states of awe naturally turns its head to gaze at the spewing cone of human desire. Depend on small things igniting, in this anthology, sensual, sometimes incestuous explosions: Taylor will observe the incipient eruption so well, ‘hands accidentally brushing hips . . . gazes held for a moment longer than is proper’. She will even capture the dance that intrigues and inflames the dead, unveiling how Japanese ‘ghosts returned for Obon [to] celebrate among us—their spectral bodies pul[sing] in rhythm with the drumming’. How passionately will characters (dead or alive) love in this book, what reckless risks will they take, how absolutely will they overthrow reason, and how throaty will be their laughter through it all. Roll your eyes at them, flush a brighter pink, smile, or joke, but know just as in the old days of spectacularly popular Gothic romances, you will now be living through these characters, attending the luscious temple of the body. No, you don’t want to be good, sensible, and sane, as Oates’s protagonist Gillian discovers—you *want to live*. Or, as one of Douglas Unger’s figures says about how a chance of place peaks libido, ‘Just enjoy the time here, the effect it has . . .’ All beauty that’s desolate and mysterious vanishes far too quickly anyway, as we glimpse in Moshiri’s *Against Gravity*, spying a ‘tall shadow moving on the brick wall of the closed shops across the street . . . the shape of a woman with a narrow waist, [now] disappeared’. Most unknowable of all—until it’s too late—is what Boyle pursues in ‘The Black and White Sisters’: the fact that you never know what could arouse you and where that might lead, as our yard-man hero finds when he peers hypnotically into his employer’s ‘black-rimmed eyes and lips the colour of a dead streetwalker’s’. Is there a message behind all this sweating, grasping, biting, and barking-mad sex? Maybe not, but if there *is*, it blinks at us as fast as the love itself: Gothic blood runs hot; we all have this desire for amnesia-through-loving; and the world forever secretly adores the passionate, forgiving their crimes (mostly).

In the old Gothic, nothing scared so much as a touch of the cold and the foreign in the midst of the familiar, for it begged the question, ‘What has become of the world we knew?’ Floating through an open window or door, moaning from the torture dungeons below, or rising over a decaying body, the presence made for nights full of awful potential, flesh corrupted, worldviews smashed, and souls snatched. What has mutated within the Gothic, you now hold in your hands. It is wandering, seductive, ironic, erotic, and gloriously grotesque. Its new presence swells, bursting the pod of original Gothic doubt, flying on winds to six continents. Go and read now, and take care the pieces of your own heart.

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