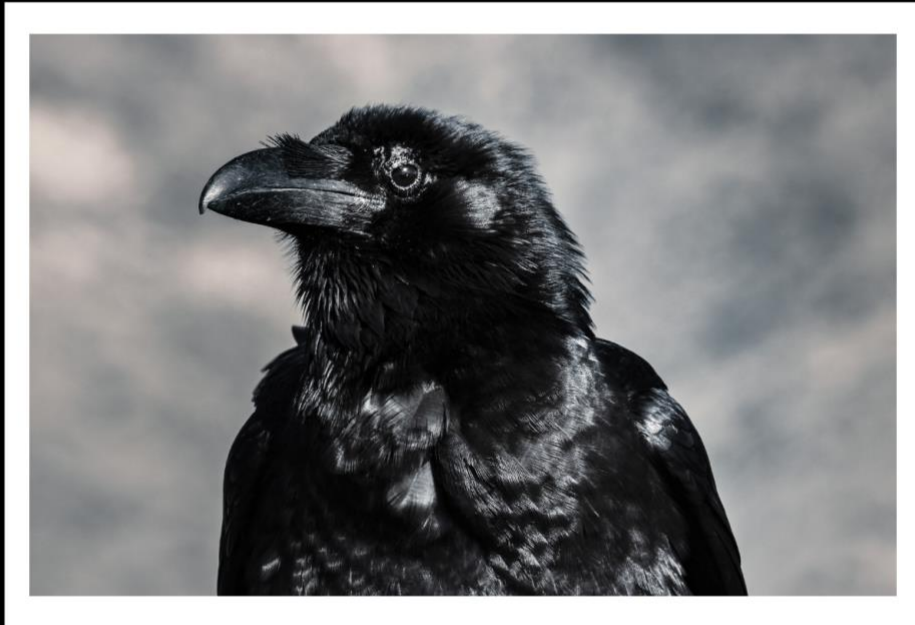


THE RAVEN REVIEW

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Alexandra Grunberg

I Didn't Mean to Kill Your Ghost

accidents happen

suddenly

in choices more like habits

a knife slicing through air

in a crystalized shatter

like a pendant slipping

from a necklace

unclasped

I still feel the chain of you

pooling

in the palm of my hand

and then

,

,

,

I haunt the podium

where you used to sing

and your voice still

a helpless accusation

e c h o e s

you were in pain

I did you a favour

it was an accident

How many times

do I have to die

and come back again

before I realize

the rules were never

fair

it was an accident

it was an accident

Analee Kirby Kluge

II

I hold vigil
for your mass of
matter
once distinct
now extinct
from another mass of
matter.

I hold vigil
for your self-directed
independence
dependent on definitive
fear.

I hold vigil
for your autonomous
body
drifting afloat
in amniotic night.

I weep and weep and weep.

Anthony Salandy

Academia Contrived

Dusted books have become distorted
And synthetic in their symbolic capital,
Where large are fonts verbose

And all knowing,
For no thought is free in digital existence
Drained of concrete substance

And controlled by years of documentation
Derived from playing a system closed,
Where only far removed status holders

May determine what can be heard,
What should be understood
Amongst paradigms in battle persistent,

But only archived references remain,
Interpreted by generations ever coerced
Into academic submission,

Characteristic of gated social fields, ironic.

April Banniser

MASTER(PIECE)

scoop out my face with a silver-pronged
fork and make me
gaunt in the cheeks

tell you i love you but never
in a letter i don't know
your number and don't occupy a return
address

and where is the distinction
the difference you are
all over me

and i am prettiest when you
cover me in red

watch you laughing without sound

watch you select the butcher
knife and suggest the saw instead—
not as clean, you say, but
deeper, i say, and you should know

i like razor blades over pencil sharpeners
scissors over thumbtacks
compasses only if i'm desperate

and never glass, not anymore. and yes,
yes, for my skull a saw will be best.
maybe the knife another time,
honey, through a different heap of bone.

Beck Anson

Pantom for Your Ghost

You are with me in Belmont
where in my dreams you write to me that
your surrender was surviving
as you swallow a necklace of pearls.

Where in my dreams you write to me that
the madness is no fault of your own.
As you swallow a necklace of pearls,
you count to ten to hush the buzzing.

The madness is no fault of your own
as your latest research suggests.
You count to ten to hush the buzzing
telephone wires strung between your ears.

As your latest research suggests,
you fall into bed with the psychiatrist's assessment.
Telephone wires strung between your ears
echoing taunts of Catholic school elementary.

You fall into bed with the psychiatrist's assessment
because his degree speaks for itself.
Echoing taunts of Catholic school elementary,
you turn inkblots into memoirs.

Because his degree speaks for itself,
you swallow the pills, you make the bed,
you turn inkblots into memoirs,
you tango late-night to the twelve-step.

You swallow the pills, you make the bed,
psychoanalyze the past with a misguided eye,
you tango late-night to the twelve-step,
you tell the stories you need to tell.

Psychoanalyze the past with a misguided eye,
discover that it doesn't matter if

you tell the stories you need to tell —
there's no one else, hold yourself.

Discover that it doesn't matter if
you are with me in Belmont.
There's no one else, hold yourself —
your surrender was surviving.

Carol Hamilton
Another Spring

I know the wild weeds
that will come come primavera,
fiercely awakened, triumphant,
unconquerable they will seem,
and yet, if my strength returns
I will start again
the battle to make space
for a bit of order,
an abundance of color
and fruits to pick
and share for one more season.

There is no mystery
to the overwhelming sense
of how small two hands are,
how one day untended
turns to chaos, and yet.
the sun on morning shoulders,
fingers dirt-coated and probing,
we go at it again, I uncomforted
with artificial air or light
or amusement. The telephone
is only a lifeline in the pocket,
the day only an added blessing.

*Cordelia Harrison***Maw**

Patrick Carlyle crept into the building. His eyes were darting around the area like a blue bottle fly. The glass visitor booth to his immediate left was empty, the porcelain counter housing an old-fashioned telephone with a rotary dial. The floor was tiled a black and white vinyl and led directly to a gloomy stairwell. Atop the high ceiling a single light bulb gleamed like a polished pearl. Patrick cleared his throat, coughing dryly and uneasily adjusting his cheap striped tie. His allergies were acting up. No doubt because the area was covered in a thick layer of dust. The cold air smelt vaguely of old mothballs. The telephone message had provided detailed directions. He had expected a formal establishment. Nothing this deserted.

“Hello?” Patrick called uneasily his voice echoing emptily around the high walls. No response and his anxiety about the entire situation trebled. Perhaps this was a bad idea. However, the telephone at the reception immediately let out a high-pitched ring. Haltingly Patrick lifted the receiver carefully holding it against his ear like a child with a seashell.

“Mr. Carlyle.” A tinny voice issued from the ancient speaker. “Please come up.” How odd. Patrick inhaled nervously. Stepping forward as timidly as a young deer on a pavement, he moved through the room, making his way up the winding stairs. The whitewashed walls were murky as candle wax, free from any kind of paintings or decoration. The area was unnaturally silent too, there was no hint of the bustle and background noise so commonly found in a normal working environment.

Patrick had made the appointment behind his wife’s back and as far as she knew he was working late. No reason for Jenny to have any suspicions about what he was really doing. Didn’t stop him feeling guilty though. They had a good marriage. He adored his wife. They told each other *everything*. Creeping around was an entirely new experience and it wasn’t pleasant.

Pete Ford, a lawyer at the advertising agency, had given Patrick the number after the younger man had drunkenly blurted out his woes at the firm’s anniversary dinner. The solicitor had simply commented that the young clerk looked tired. Bleary eyed and halfway through his second bottle of red, Patrick had stupidly told the old man what the trouble was. The constant threat of violence, the verbal abuse, how there was only so much more he could take before cracking up completely... The silver-haired solicitor had a craggy face and prominent nose like a

jutting tree branch. He listened sympathetically to Patrick rant then reached into his wallet with deliberation.

“Here. They are quick and very discrete.” Ford had leaned over and slick as oil, slipped the card into Patrick’s top pocket, touching his nose confidentially.

“She’ll never know. Mark my words.”

Patrick found Ford’s little gift when he sobered up the following morning. Through a raging hangover he began to piece together the events of the night before. Patrick remembered with horror that he had revealed all his troubles to Ford, some sleazy corporate lawyer who was practically a stranger. Wincing at the memory and trying to ignore the excruciating throb behind his eye sockets Patrick slumped downstairs before queasily settling at the breakfast table in his work clothes. Jenny was delicately nibbling at a piece of watermelon, her small white teeth biting into the fleshy core of the fruit. She seemed dryly amused at the delicate state her husband was in and raised a single eyebrow. In the pale morning light, her hair glinted copper. Penny red. Like a vixen’s coat. It was the first thing he ever noticed about her. Jenny had been standing in front of him in the queue for some modern art exhibition a few years ago. She smelt lush, like sweet amber and sandalwood. When she eventually turned about to face him, he thought she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“You were in one hell of a state last night. Was it worth it?” Massaging his temple Patrick made a rueful face in response. Jenny snorted delicately but didn’t press the matter, velvet brown eyes distant. They had dated for a while before she told him the truth about her home life. She lived with her grandparents and had never known her real mother. Nothing wrong with that. Patrick thought they were nice old couple, kindly, generous. But then Nana Shaw died suddenly, and Grandpa Shaw hadn’t been able to process the loss. That’s when all the trouble started.

At the other end of the breakfast table Grandpa was in a docile mood reading the morning newspaper in silence. Patrick felt ashamed when he thought how he had been railing against the old man the previous night and busied himself with the marmalade. Unfortunately, the gentle domestic scene didn’t last longer than a few minutes. Grandpa picked up his bowl of porridge and without warning, viciously cast it onto the stone floor with relish. Patrick jumped, violently choking on his orange juice and his wife hung her head with a slow shuddering breath.

Grandpa began to roar incoherently flailing his arms around like a turtle on its back. He turned a malicious eye on Jenny and began to spew out foul obscenities. She was so used to his behaviour by now that her face was deliberately blank, but Patrick could see her slender shoulders stiffening. He helped restrain the old man, forcibly pulling his arms down and bundling him into the wheelchair. Grandpa still managed to pummel him thoroughly in the process and managed to land a particularly malicious blow whilst Jenny ran for a sedative. As the old man bellowed, piping foul smelling breath into his face like a chimney Patrick felt a sudden overpowering hatred. Another shocked caregiver had walked out only a few days ago, and none of the local nursing homes felt equipped to take him in. As if either of them had the money for that anyway...

By the time Grandpa had finally settled down, the kitchen looked as though a bomb had hit it. Jenny was tentatively picking broken glass off the floor and Patrick had a bruise ripening above his eyelid. Late for work, he hurriedly changed into a new shirt and with a certain brutal defiance retrieved the card he had tossed into the waste basket earlier.

Settling into his reserved seat on the train sometime later, Patrick resolutely dialed the number on Ford's card. An automated message played requesting he leave his name and details. A few nights after, someone left a voice mail on his phone with instructions. And now here he was, at the address the stranger had described.

There was a short corridor at the top of the staircase leading to a single door. The ceiling was high, and the area was very dark. The streetlights outside were the only source of illumination. Patrick touched the windowsill and some of the paint flaked off into his hand. He flicked it away with a single fingernail.

"In here," a voice called out. Patrick turned the splintered wooden handle of the door ahead, surprised to find that it opened easily. The rest of the building had been draughty and bitterly cold, creaking against the wind. But this room was warm, pleasantly so. A small fire burned in an old-fashioned grate and dusty oil lamps faintly luminated the chamber. A single painting, a print of Waterhouse's "The Magic Circle" was positioned high on the wall above a bookcase filled with tomes, most of them beautifully bound classics. The room was painted crimson red.

There was a long oak wood table, shiny as a new penny. A tall figure sat at the very end in a high-backed armchair his arms crossed. The light was dim, and Patrick couldn't quite see the other's face. The curtains were drawn and most his visage was cast into shadow.

"Patrick Carlyle?" The stranger had deep vocals, they were musical and rather agreeable sounding like a finely tuned cello. Patrick squinted through the gloom at the individual and coughed again at the clouds of dust winding through the air.

"That's me." The spokesman stood and smoothly held out a hand. He was middle aged and oddly handsome with prominent cheekbones and a drooping black moustache. His eyes were steel grey and his hair the colour of crushed velvet. And he was insanely, vividly white. As the two politely shook hands, Patrick was surprised at how cold the gentleman's fingers were. It was if the other had just dipped them in a bucket of ice and held them there, unflinching for five minutes.

Patrick hastily produced the photographs and documents the message had asked him to bring and spread them across the table. The dark-haired man scanned them quickly then nodded apparently satisfied with the prepared articles. He tapped a photograph with a long finger.

"So, this is our client? Theodore Shaw, age seventy-nine?" He smiled, grey eyes glinting disarmingly. "Shaw is your wife's maiden name, I suppose?"

"Yes," Patrick muttered.

"You wouldn't be the first." The owner of the agency chuckled wolfishly baring huge white teeth.

"So...how much is it?" Patrick stammered reaching for his wallet. He had stopped at a cash machine earlier and emptied his meagre savings account. The owner of the agency took his hand in restraint. The solid strength of the man was unbelievable. Patrick realised if the stranger had wanted to, he could have snapped his neck like a twig.

"There is no charge. The service is a benefit to me. I do it all for free." The other smiled then and his smile gleamed like a newly whetted knife. Huh. Patrick found himself considering the incredible, sharp points of his incisors. The young man had a horrid foreboding then and a feeling that he had unearthed some terrible knowledge. The world had changed. Everything he thought he knew was wrong. Unconsciously, Patrick had stepped backwards a few paces. A creeping chill ran up his spine.

“As you have granted me entry, I will come to your house tonight. Your wife will not hear me. You’ll find him in the morning. I work quickly and cleanly. You won’t know I was there. We have a deal?”

“Y...yes!” Patrick blurted, stammering, and starting to tremble like a disintegrating leaf. He felt like he was flailing in deep waters, helpless as a child. The pale man dismissed him with a rather ghoulish grin. The other had evidently noticed he was petrified.

“Good! A pleasure doing business! And please, take my card.” After retrieving the proffered card with numb fingers Patrick turned and hurtled out the room, sprinting as if the very hounds of hell were nipping at his heels. He could hear the stranger laughing softly.

Patrick slammed down the staircase, bolted through the narrow corridor and skidded into the street. Throwing himself into the battered car parked outside, Patrick immediately locked all the windows. His hands were trembling so much he could barely get the keys in to start the ignition. As soon as the motor began running, Patrick shot off, driving as fast as he could, breaking the speed limit to get away from the forbidden office. *What had he done?*

In the dim room the man behind the agency licked his pale colourless lips. Soon his thirst would be quenched.

Crystal Bowden

Wrought

A weightiness strung across an exhausted body
dragging it to the deepest depths of the water,
thick and murky and without clarity
overtaking the mind, the senses, the heart
squashing everything in its path of destruction, turned grey and darkened.

I remember reading once of a woman in a garden
herself exposed, relief brought by bleeding crimson, the dribbling, then gushing
deterioration of the body as that which makes us womanly
flows back into nature, returning to the earth
a symbol of the cycle of life it has wrought out.

Flesh peels aside to expose the hiding child
tucked away within, reminders that she still desperately seeks love and
hasn't found the solace of a decision well made.
Maybe forgiveness is never about the Other,
but only ever about releasing yourself for what you've done.

Emily Anderson

Parasomnia

I died today
Though you cannot tell
Because I am still breathing
And my heart continues beating.

Death came for me
As he does for us all
He left my body
But he took my soul.

I traveled through hell
Without leaving my home
I was frozen in terror
And my blood ran cold.

The devil welcomed me
With the face I feared most
Though he offered me his hand
Like a long-lost friend.

“Wake up, wake up”
I screamed to myself.
Which made the devil grin
And laugh to himself.

He reached after me
As I ran away
But there is nowhere to hide
No matter what they say.

My soul quivered in fear
As I hid in the dark.
He whispered in my ear
While his breath stopped my heart.

A voice in the darkness
Called out my name.
It was one I recognized

And I knew I was safe.

I woke in my bed
In the arms of my savior.
No longer afraid
And far from dead.

My lover held me
Safe and sound.
He chased away the devil
And kept me from hell.

Hailey Black

Habit to Habitat

He said you were a different person
Then the one he used to know
When the love was easy
Before you started disappearing into the shadows
Of dive-bar bathrooms
Where you believed your secrets
Wouldn't be revealed within your tiny, dark pupils
Before your friends started questioning the honesty of your voice
Science tells me that addiction is not inherited
But I fear for the future
We are so brief
A dandelion waiting for a breeze
A cruel reality
You were just a red, leather jacket at the top of the stairs
The girl crying in the bathroom stall next to mine
Shoelaces undone Grey and soggy
I wanted to say
I forgive you
I forgive you
Even if you don't forgive yourself
You don't belong here
Let me take you home

John Tustin

The Swimmer

When I finally get to sleep
I swim out to that pile of rocks
Where she has been calling me

With her eyes that are
All the oceans of the earth

And her mouth that is
Fanning leaves and dark cool sand and ripe fruit.

She calls me each night
From her pile of rocks
Just within reach of this out-of-shape swimmer

And I come up to her with my face red
And my chest largely heaving.

We sit together side by side waiting in the pre-dawn
For the sky to turn from purple to orange-red to blue.

We don't say a word.
Her hip touches mine
While we wait for the morning to come

And for me to awaken—forgetting her like every morning;
Forgetting her eyes that are all the oceans of the earth.

Juanita Rey

Caiman Man

His eyes and nostrils
float atop the surface.
The rest of him makes no sound,
no ripples.

I don't suspect a thing.
Water is cleansing, purifying.
It's not supposed to conceal.

He has a name
like any other man.
But his hunger
growls nameless.

I figure I'm splashing about
in perfect safety.
No caiman in this pond.
But all it takes
is one creature like him.

Kevin Stadt

Control Shriek

the contamination glitch
is a mosquito bite of the mind
offering flavors of torture:
scratch now, louder later
or
sit with the screams
cut deep and heal in
glacial degrees

a flashing popup window
endless repetitions crowding the crowding the crowding the desktop
warnings of infection
click click clickclickclickCLICKCLICKCLICK
as the scam respawns

check over, with, into, up on, out of,
echoing bottlenecks

fractions of truth loop
the diseased computations
of a risk management reject in
relentless peril

he lies through his skin, watching
history deplete itself, hearing
wails chase him into
traps of dreamed steel

he made his
stain, and now he
lies in it
crust cracked raw on the
tainted membrane

repeat, redo, renew, rehashreiterateREPLAYREPEATREPEATREPEAT

years caught in a stonework

maze, clawing fingernails
broken and lost
feet bleeding
spirit drained and crazed
while others pass through
the walls like ghosts
with a smile and wave

Larry Pike

Wedding Party

Casual grips on longnecks,
fast, loose dances,
delights among merry friends—
promise of youth rising like light
fog hovering nearby over cool grass.

Let them have this.

Nothing tonight will
linger. Soon enough
bride and groom will know
a distant vantage, hold tighter to

their claim to love. Unable to stop
themselves, in middle age
they'll raise like tonight's toasts
questions that will hang
dense and damp on their bones,
loft longer on their lips than this
evening's laughter. *Did we live?*
At least not waste much of what life
we had? Their quiet answers will be
little light in another fog.

Margaret Ohrn

Sister, Incarcerated

If only I could just recall
the words I gave the judge that day.
I think I'm sorry for it all.

You roamed the streets that endless fall
and lost your keys, your child, your way.
But how, I just cannot recall.

Cell walls—a desperate ploy to stall,
to keep you safe and death at bay,
I think. I'm sorry for it all.

Guards searched my body, scared and small
but yours, in orange, would waste away.
If only I could not recall.

I saw you at dad's funeral
in heels and pearls. No words to say.
I feel so sorry for it all.

I wish there'd been a crystal ball
to show the meanings of *betray*.
If only I could just recall.
I think I'm sorry for it all.

Margarita Serafimova

Untitled

I called my force to stand beside me,
and we wrapped our arms around each other's shoulders.
And then, something out of us flew forth.
A flaming serenity.

Melody Wang
After the Storm

He turns his head, steady
hand shading his eyes from
something luminous in the
distance beckoning to him

Pausing, eyes cast
downward, he takes in
the world at this angle: crushed
daisies bend too-heavy florets,
unapologetically lackadaisical

A far-off knell resonates faintly. He,
transfixed by the ground's uneven
puddle, gazes at the unknown being
staring back with searching eyes
turned nebulous with doubt. He is

struck by the quiet candor
he almost missed, by the faint
aura like effulgent clouds
dissipating after the storm

Michael Howard

Age of Enlightenment

When I was seven, my parents moved us out of our apartment and into a house on a street called Knot. The house was small, very small, but it had a third bedroom, which we needed since my mom was pregnant with my sister Judy. Before Judy it was just me and Hubert, who showed up when I was three. I wasn't happy when I learned that I'd still be sharing a bedroom with him in the house on Knot. Nor was I happy about having to change schools. In fact, I was pretty cross about it, as I recall. A new school meant making new friends, and I was never good at making friends.

This new school was named Green Village. Still is, I suppose. Green Village Elementary. My old school I could walk to, but I had to take the bus to get to Green Village. It was a long ride—I was the first one on the bus in the morning and the last one off in the afternoon. On the way home one day I fell asleep and the driver, not seeing me, took me all the way back to the bus garage. I had to wait there with an old woman who gave me pretzels and marveled at the curls in my hair until my dad could pick me up after work. He wasn't pleased.

The neighborhoods around the school had nothing in common with mine. Green Village was like another dimension. I looked with interest at the big two-story houses and the bright manicured lawns, the tall hedges, as they slid past the bus window. There was no envy in my gaze then, only admiration—the sort of feeling you get when you take in a vivid sunset or watch a meteor shower.

I was self-conscious and embarrassed my first day of class, which was a full three months into the school year. I stood rigidly at the front of the room while the teacher, a Mrs. Emory, introduced me to my new peers.

“This is Gavin,” she told the class. “Say hello to Gavin.”

“Heelloo Gaaviin.”

I waved, pulling nervously at the strap of my backpack with my other hand. If there's one thing that I can't stand it's the sensation of being looked at, and I couldn't wait for her to stop talking and show me to my desk so that I could disappear for a while. When she finally did, I found myself next to a boy with neatly combed hair and Persian blue eyes. He wore a white Ralph Lauren polo shirt that, judging from the wrinkles in it, had been tucked into his jeans at some point that morning. His sneakers were new and clean. When I sat down, he stood up and said, “I'm William. Want to be friends?”

“OK.”

And so we were. It turned out that William was more or less the chief of the class—or of the boys of the class—which made me a sort of second-in-command. I took the position with pride. Wherever he went I went with him, whatever he did I did too, and whenever I said something the others looked to him before challenging me, as though to ask permission. If William changed his hairstyle, I copied it, and then the rest of the boys did the same. I even asked my mom if she would get me a polo shirt like the ones William wore. She told me to ask my dad. My dad said no.

During recess we played sports, usually football, and William and I picked the teams: all the strongest athletes on our side, everyone else on the other. The idea was to win by as wide a margin as possible. This went on until a disgruntled classmate brought it to the attention of Mrs. Emory, who chided William and me and forced us to play on opposing teams. By that point

she'd split us up in the classroom too—William sat in the front row and I sat in the back. But it didn't make much of a difference. She could never really separate us. That required something else.

“Can William come over sometime?” I asked my mom one night before dinner. Judy was a few months old by then and my mom was trying to make her stop crying, holding her, and bouncing her up and down and talking to her in a high-pitched voice. The living room was narrow and cluttered, with one small window that never seemed to let any light in.

She looked at me and said, “William from school?”

I nodded.

“Ask Dad when he gets home.”

“OK.”

I watched TV and waited. Judy cried and cried. Around six thirty my dad walked through the door in his work boots and his grease-stained clothes and, muttering to himself, took a can of beer from the fridge. He drank from it and belched. He was a prodigious belcher. During dinner that night my mom looked at me and gestured with her head to my dad.

“Dad?” I asked.

“Yes?”

“Can William come over the house?”

He turned to my mom, then back to me. “Who's William?”

“Oh, you know William,” my mom said. “He's Gavin's friend from school.”

“Oh, yeah,” my dad said, looking at me. “Of course. William. You wanta have him over, huh?”

“Can I?”

“When?”

“I don't know.”

My mom said, “Why don't you invite him over this Saturday?”

We both looked at my dad to see his reaction. “A'right,” he said agreeably. “Tell him to come over on Saturday.”

“What time should he tell him to come?” My mom asked.

My dad furrowed his brow. My mom suggested noon and my dad nodded his head. “A'right.”

“Tell him to come at noon, Gavin,” my mom said.

“OK,” I said, containing my excitement.

The next day, I told William that my mom said he could come over the house the following Saturday. “At noon,” I said. His hair was flipped up in the front, as was mine, held in place by a thick coating of hairspray. I'd given him my address the day before, so all he had to do now was ask one of his parents to drive him over. Maybe I could get one of my parents to drive him back home. That way it would be fair.

William was drawing a picture of a hockey player in his notebook and he didn't look up from it. I thought he hadn't heard me, so I told him again that my mom said he was allowed to come over at noon on Saturday.

“I can't,” he said, still drawing.

“Are you busy Saturday?”

“Yeah.”

“What about Sunday?”

“Can't.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re busy?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to come over?”

Maintaining his focus on his drawing, he said without malice, “My dad said he doesn’t want me going to a slum.”

I didn’t know the word, but I didn’t need to. I walked over to my desk and sat down, and we didn’t speak for the rest of the day. When the bus dropped me at home that afternoon, I noticed for the first time that every piece of the sidewalk in front of our house was uneven and cracked. I saw, too, how small our front yard was, and that it was more dirt than grass. I’d been walking through the same rusted metal gate for five months but pushing it open on my way to the front door I found its screech to be unbearable, and kicked it shut as hard as I could.

Inside, Judy was crying loudly. I dropped my backpack on the floor and moved to the living room, where the wallpaper was stained with nicotine and the cushions on the sofa were caved in from overuse. It occurred to me then that the whole house smelled. I wondered if I smelled too. Moments later my mom walked into the room with Judy in her arms and Hubert on her heels.

“How was school?” she said.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you have a good day?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s wrong, Gavin?”

“Nothing!” I snapped and stomped into my bedroom.

Hubert stomped after me, saying, “Gavin, what’s wrong, Gavin?” Judy cried and cried. I reached my bed and lay down on it. Hubert followed. “What’s wrong, Gavin?”

“Shut up!” I turned over and faced the bare wall, which was becoming blurry.

He said, “What’s wrong, Gavin?” and stood at the edge of the bed. When I felt his hand on my shoulder, I swung my arm behind me and, with a clenched fist, hit him square in the nose. His pratfall made a rattling thump. He began to cry. That made three of us.

Olaitan Humble
Of Thorns & Flowers

I presented myself to you in a
blue-brown ribbon taped with
an inscription from my father's
grave:

“Je t’aime”

the only French statement I know.

I was only eight when father kicked
the bucket, when he swallowed the
candies the Grim Reaper served him.

We—my mother & I—were there
bearing witness to his smiles
in between gulps from the water
of life, or so we thought.

I built a brewery on his grave.
Every time he takes a step further into the
darkness, I draw him back with
a bottle of Hennessy / with the scorn
of a bathtub gin served on sunny
days.

Father's dying words were:

*remember my admonitions &
safeguard the petals under your garment.*

I used to be a home to many petals but
when life happens / promises become
 like debris of a fire outbreak
 like wreckage of a sank ship
 like carcass of a dead animal
& when you happened / you crushed my petals
& called it love
& called me your first but I made me your last—
It took just a bottle of cyanide

Peggy Turnbull

The Meanness Afoot

with a threatening thrum
three super-sized trucks
follow too closely

a pack of predators
harrying prey
on the lonely highway

you pull off at Route P
they whoosh past—
one, two, three—

three brains
plugged into
a central command

hollow stalks rattle
late-autumn fields
sink into night's

fertilizer stench
your cognition thickens
your thoughts stop

soon you're mindless
a zooming, tailgating
road-raging

robot driver
converting others
on the ruthless road

Rachael Charlotte

The Professor's Party

The date had been circled on the calendar, in thick red marker, well before the new year had commenced and the calendar been put to use. It had been slid into academic and personal diaries, and etched upon my own mind, for months prior to its arrival.

9th April 1995 (Sunday)

My wife, Anne, had been busy in the kitchen since 7:00 AM preparing; the whole extended family were coming, many of my academic colleagues (including the Dean), and all our closest friends. Anne had been on edge for the previous two or three months, spending most of her waking hours anxiously consumed with the planning and preparation, and had drafted in Rosalind and Penelope, our two daughters, to help. It was the largest 'event' we'd ever hosted, and it was all in celebration of my national television premier, a BBC2 six-part-documentary series examining the life and works of John Milton, co-presented by myself, and two of my similarly esteemed colleagues. I had already seen the first episode in private and my skin tingled with pride as I saw: DR DOUGLAS BRADWELL, LEADING EXPERT ON MILTON, UNIVERSITY OF HUMBERSIDE, flash up in the bottom right-hand corner as I appeared on screen. My mother had been brought up from London by my sister Caro. Even my lesser-spotted son, Francis, had agreed to emerge from the bedroom he voluntarily imprisoned himself in by day and was making agreeable conversation with Roz and Penny's respective husbands. Our dining room, large as it was and opening out into an even larger living space, still struggled to accommodate the swell of colleagues, friends, and family who had turned out to offer their support.

The television had been set up so it could be viewed from any of the seats around the room, although there were not enough for everyone, and many had to stand. The documentary was to air at 4:00 PM, the guests had started to make an appearance at 2:30 PM, the canapes served (thanks to Anne) at 3:00 PM.

"This is great Dad," the ever disappointing, twenty-two-year-old Francis mouthed, whilst digesting three sausage rolls at once.

"Wonderful," gushed Roz (the pretty one), and "I'm so proud of you Dad," said Penny (the intelligent one).

"An untarnished career," Gary, Rosalind's mechanic husband said, and I still don't know what he meant, but I thanked him anyway.

At 3:35 PM (I was checking my watch every five minutes by that point, to make sure I didn't inadvertently miss the start), I excused myself from the wine and mini quiches to go to the bathroom. On my way downstairs the doorbell rang, I was only a foot away, so I answered it.

“Hello,” a tall, spindly, blonde boy of around seventeen or eighteen years old, who I had never seen before, stood on my doorstep. Perhaps he was one of my undergraduates who hardly ever turned up for seminars.

“Can I help you?” I asked, trying to be polite, but also anxious with regards to the time.

“Yes, I think so...” he began nervously, and I noticed that he was a strikingly handsome young man, with blue eyes so sharp I was convinced they could sting a person, if a person wasn’t being careful. He stammered and stuttered on, verbosity clearly a talent, but struggled in finding his way to the point.

“What’s your name then, boy?” I asked, in a rather irritated, school-masterly voice.

“Richard,” he blurted, “Richard Fitch.” I’d never heard of him.

“I’m sorry, look, we’re having a party, what did you want?”

“Er, well, it’s just...” I noticed his hands were shaking, I sighed inwardly, “the thing is sir, Mr. Bra—no, Dr Bradwell, I think you knew my mother. She was one of your students. Alice Fitch.”

Fuck.

My chest constricted and felt as though someone had placed a blood-pressure monitor around it, tighter, tighter; was I having a heart-attack? I couldn’t breathe. Faint and dizzy, wobbling on my two usually steady feet, I felt for the doorframe, pressed my shoulder into it to gain some respite, at least, from the force of gravity. This was the kind of clichéd thing mainstream writers for prime-time soap operas liked to regularly pull out of the bag. I’d seen it enough in television programmes and films and would often chortle at the poor sod who had fatherhood thrust upon him with such immediacy. And now, the day I had thought I would remember fondly forever for one reason, was about to be imprinted for such another.

Alice Fitch—my pretty favourite, and as I looked at Richard, formed from her physical image, I was reminded why.

“I remember,” I told him, feeling as though I had been silent for far longer than acceptable. I could see Alice, twenty-one years old, a master’s degree student, long blonde hair tossed over a naked shoulder whilst she smoked a cigarette out of the hotel room window. Her breasts were small and pert, her body perfect, pristine like fresh-fallen snow covering a mountainside. I can try and excuse myself by saying we had small children, three of them, Anne was always tired, and we never had sex, but I won’t bother. I’ll just say that I loved Alice, in a way.

“I suppose you’re here because...” I trailed off as he burst into a pre-prepared speech, forgotten when I’d first opened the door, but now the words were kicked and shoved forward, and I couldn’t ignore them. As he spoke, I realised everything made sense. Alice had been going to apply for a Ph.D., we’d discussed her proposal at length on one of our sojourns, and I had been eagerly awaiting her application. She went home for the summer and no application ever arrived. I never heard from her again, I assumed she had moved on, forgotten about me.

It’s funny the things you think about in life-changing moments; my thoughts then were not immediately for Anne, or Francis, or the girls, no, I wondered why Alice had called him

Richard. Why not Douglas or Dougie? Was it one of his middle-names perhaps? Or had she chosen something like William, for my father? Did she even know my father's name? Did she even know Richard was here? I wondered what he'd been like at school, if he was studious or spent his days smoking pot and staring at a computer screen like his half-brother. Did he want to come in? He didn't. He could see it wasn't convenient. He apologised for timing his visit so poorly, he'd been planning it for months, but anxiety had always got the better of him. He said he was sorry to bother me and sorry that I hadn't known about him, as though it were his fault. It transpired that his grandparents had wanted their daughter to stay away from my 'corrupting influence', and she clung to them, dependent on their support and unable to trust me. I would have lived up to that untrustworthiness, I think. Richard thanked me for my time, apologised again, and said he was pleased to have met me.

"Come on Dougie, it's about to start," Anne's voice hammered away my reverie, as I watched Alice's son stroll off into the afternoon. I scuttled back inside and told them there had been a very dogged conservatory salesman. Anne had saved me a place on the sofa, where I sat, exhausted; I wondered if she would ever forgive me. Alice Fitch had by no means been my only affair, but she had been the only one of any real meaning.

I felt a fraud as I received tumultuous applause for the resounding success of my debut television appearance, pats on the back, a clamouring to shake my hand, the celebration we had hoped for.

I watched Anne from across the room in her blue dress with its elaborate shoulder-pads, then Rosalind, Penelope, and Francis, and then the room filled with people. If I could have chosen to remain there on that 9th of April moment, I would have done so. I'd had dreams of a retirement to our villa in Portugal, fishing and golf in the Algarve, grandchildren to stay in the holidays. I stood on the precipice in that moment, about to be flung forward into a complex unknown.

Reed Kuehn

Saint Elmo's Ire

The first time they saw the flames was during a storm along the western coast of Africa. The tempest came upon them with the fury that only Mother Nature possesses. Superstitious as they were, the sailors rubbed talismans, spoke ancient prayers, and threw offerings into the frothing sea, but to no effect. They secured the sheets and rigging as the storm raged, indifferent to their plight and pleas. Over the howling wind, a cry from above caught the crew's attention. The lad Davies was high on the topsail, but they fixed their gazes above him to the mast's tip. Like Prometheus defying the Gods, the blue flames stood proud in the face of nature's wrath. The sailors were transfixed as the blaze burned bright in the driving rain and screeching gale. The storm's intensity responded to this challenge and increased its power, but the otherworldly fire didn't falter.

At the helm, the captain took note and followed the crew's gaze to the spectacle above. He watched in awe as the flames stood proud in the face of their impending doom. Horrified, he saw the fire coalesce into a grotesque face that stared right at him. The demon's voice was clear over the cacophony, and the captain listened to the proffered deal. He gripped the wheel with whitened knuckles and nodded without hesitation. The face in the fire grinned with bloodlust and glee. The crew watched in horror as the living flames crept down the mast toward Davies, suspended below. They climbed over his body, sizzled and popped around him, but did no harm. The sailors watched as Davies extended an arm outlined in a shimmering blue fire to the ship's starboard side. Distracted, they did not see the rogue wave before it slammed into the hull, washed over the deck, and nearly capsized them.

Slowly, the ship righted itself as the crew recovered and returned to their stations. As quickly as it had come upon them, the storm abated and left the vessel bobbing in the agitated waters. The captain looked to the mainmast. The flames were gone, as was Davies, who had been blasted into the hungry ocean.

"Man overboard!" the captain shouted. The crew took to the rails and searched the frothy seas for their lost shipmate. They kept watch until the light waned, but the shroud of night forced them to accept Davies' fate. The captain authorized increased rum rations for the crew to toast their fallen comrade and went below decks.

The ship creaked as he maneuvered the tight passageways toward his cabin. Hushed voices and whispers seemed to taunt him and the deal he had struck with the gods of seas and skies. The captain bristled for allowing his mind to succumb to such thoughts and drowned out the noise. He yelled into the hold to quiet the voices of the condemned. He didn't believe in ghosts and gods, merely the capabilities and actions of men. The supernatural realm was his wife's interest, but even as he rationalized what had occurred, he couldn't clear his mind of the visage etched into his brain. He took a deep breath and entered his cabin with a broad smile and a calm countenance. Charlotte, dressed in ivory lace from the full-length hem to a choker collar, sat at her reading table. A deck of playing cards was spread out in front of her. He sighed when

he saw the gleam in her eye and the cards arranged in front of her and knew she wasn't waiting to play a game of hearts. He kissed her forehead and gently stroked her porcelain cheek.

"You know, my beloved, as captain of this ship, the law is in my hands." He whispered in her ear, "Do you know the fine for cartomancy on the high seas?" He could feel the heat rise from her neck as she playfully pushed him away.

"My dear Captain Carter, as an accomplice to these dark arts, how do you think you would fare in the eyes of the court?" She responded with a wink and a grin.

"Ah, yes. Better we keep these macabre practices to ourselves, lest the populace becomes suspicious of our true power." He smiled widely, and the two broke out in laughter.

"Alexander. You are too rich, my love. Has the storm passed?"

"Yes, my dear. The powerful squall came upon us with such fury as I have rarely seen on the seas. The ship fared well, but alas; we lost a man." His wife's face softened to one of genuine sadness.

"Then, my brave captain, pour the wine, and we shall toast his memory and service to Queen and Country."

"Hear. Hear." Captain Carter opened a bottle of wine and filled two crystal goblets with the sanguineous liquid. The weak lantern lights caught the crystal, which sent small prismatic beams about the cabin. They raised their glasses silently, and each downed a healthy mouthful. He took a seat opposite her and stared into her aquamarine eyes, which had the power to entrance and disquiet him simultaneously. "What do they say tonight, as we make our escape from that hellish storm?" he asked, looking at the cards strewn across the table.

"You indulge my occult fancies this eve, my captain?" Charlotte asked slyly.

"Whether it be the wind or the wine, let us peer into the beyond and gain a possible glimpse of clarity, shall we?" She grinned and began shuffling the cards. Carter removed his boots and lit a pipe. Soon, the sweet incense of the smoke mixed with the briny sea air. With deft hands, Charlotte shuffled and laid her hand upon the deck. Her husband placed his hand on hers, and she could feel the remnants of the storm, and the wine's warmth pulsing through his touch.

"Let's begin," Charlotte said. She methodically dealt five cards. She turned the first over. "Ah, the king of diamonds. An influential but stubborn man." Captain Carter scoffed with a wink. She turned the next card. "Jack of clubs. A dark-haired and reliable youth." Carter's brow furrowed. Charlotte continued. "The ten of spades. Misfortune." Carter leaned forward in his chair. "Three of spades. A difficult partnership." Carter ground his pipe between his teeth as his anxiety grew. His wife's eyes, as if owned by another power, bored into him as she turned over the last card. "Three of hearts. Caution is advised." Carter jumped to his feet and paced the room like a feral animal. "My love, what vexes you?" He dismissed her question with a wave and stroked his beard. "I have dealt the cards; now it's time for you to tell the story." He hesitated before he sat and took a large swallow of wine.

He began quietly. "As the storm raged, I was at the helm when Davies called from the rigging. I looked, and an ethereal blue flame shot into the sky from the top of the mast. It wasn't tempered by the deluge and defied Poseidon himself. As I stared, a face appeared in the blaze

that looked straight at me. Despite the howling wind, I could hear its voice above the fray. It made me an offer—a sacrifice of one to save the rest. I am ashamed to say, my dear, that I did not hesitate. I thought of you, of the crew, and the fortunes our cargo will bring us.” Charlotte shuddered at the mention of the poor souls beneath them as Carter continued. “The fires blazed with a devilish grin, and the demon called upon us a great wave that blew Davies to the great beyond and sated the sea god’s hunger.” He took a pull on his pipe and looked at his wife. She regarded him with tenderness and pity.

“My love, it sounds like you were placed in a difficult position and forced to make a decision that no man should have to but was required to. This is a dangerous business and one the crew enters into freely. The seas are fickle, but perhaps our fortunes and safe passage have been secured.” She paused to observe her husband, who sat pensively. “Or, perhaps it was just a storm and nothing more.” He inhaled sharply and nodded in resigned agreement.

“Perhaps,” he said quietly. The two sat in silence before they retired for the evening, and each other’s warm embrace.

The remainder of the trip to Capetown was without event, and shortly thereafter, the ship embarked on the final leg of its voyage. One evening as the captain and his wife relaxed in their cabin, Charlotte produced the deck of cards. She grinned at her husband. He rolled his eyes and smiled in playful acquiescence.

As Charlotte shuffled, the light in the cabin dimmed, and the sounds of the sea quieted. The atmosphere became muted and suffocating, and the captain furrowed his brow at the change of his wife’s demeanor as if dark spirits hovered about her. She drew five cards and laid them face down. “And now,” she whispered, “let us see if we can divine what is to come.” She flipped the first card over. “Queen of clubs. A self-confident woman.” Flip. “Ace of spades. Obsession and deceit.” His eyes widened. Her eyes never left his as she turned over the remaining cards and finished her reading. “Seven of hearts. Broken promises. Eight of clubs. Greed. Lastly, the king of spades. An authoritative but deceptive male widower.” Her gaze burned through the gloom and into his very soul. She rose and retired as Captain Carter remained deep into the night, smoking his pipe. His anxiety ebbed and flowed with the rocking of the ship, which became increasingly erratic.

Just after midnight, the first mate crashed into the cabin. “Captain,” he stammered, “a storm is coming, and flames are back!” Carter took a deep breath and went above to face nature once more.

* * *

“Welcome, Captain Carter,” a man yelled with an extended hand on the docks in Sydney, New South Wales. “How was the leg from Capetown?”

Carter approached and shook the man’s hand warmly. “Jacobson, my friend. It has been too long. The trip was dastardly. A furious storm came upon us near equal in force to another on the African coast. By God’s grace, we prevailed through both.”

“Ah, hah! Stories for the alehouse tonight! Where is your beautiful bride? I’ve anticipated meeting her for some time to welcome her to Australia properly.”

Carter’s head lowered. “I’m sad to say that she took ill during the last storm and did not recover. She rests for eternity in the realm of the sea king.”

“My deepest condolences. Let’s get your cargo unloaded, and since you will soon be laden with coin, we will find you proper accommodations and spirits aplenty to weave the tales of your voyage. By the grace of St. Elmo, who has delivered you safely here, we will imbibe his fire and honor your beloved. Come!” At these words, Captain Carter’s face widened in abject horror.

“How,” he said, pointing at Jacobson, “did you know about the fire?”

Jacobson cocked his head to the side and regarded his friend. “Know what?” Carter’s face was ashen, and his tongue was glued in his mouth. He began to shake as Jacobson wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “Come, my friend. It has been a long voyage.” The two men walked along the docks as Carter’s ship was being unloaded.

Emaciated men, chained in lines, were brought from the hold. The sunlight struck their faces for the first time in months and caused them to wince. The dead were piled on the wharf, and those unluckily enough to have survived the voyage were welcomed to their new home. Carter walked past them as the clank of their chains, and hollow sighs haunted his passage and echoed his foul deeds.

Robin Michel

I Thought it Safe

“I thought it safe to love children.” Mama wrapped her thin arms around her legs and tucked her sharp chin between her bony knees as she sat on the cold cement. She looked so small, as if I could scoop her up and slip her into my bathrobe pocket.

“Come inside.” It was dark. The stars glinted like shards of broken glass. Resisting my hand on her arm, Mama began rocking back and forth, a moan rumbling in her throat.

“Mama, please.” I wanted to cry, but I had to keep it together. Keep us safe. I was worried she would wake my little brothers, both asleep after the crush of strangers, their possessive arms and unwanted kisses, the cloying flowers, the casseroles and Jell-o salads forced into our hands. Mama’s keening became more insistent. I saw houselights across the street turn on. “Please—”

Mascara ran down Mama’s cheeks. I found myself staring at a tiny droplet of snot hanging from her left nostril. I felt myself slipping in and out of my body, and I watched the two of us as if in a movie. I couldn’t find my slippers before coming outside. My feet were cold. Like my little brother, his body deep beneath the freshly turned dirt now covered with snow.

Yes, I was slipping in and out of my body, watching a movie about a daughter taking care of her mother and wondering if I would miss something if I decided to go pee—

And then suddenly, I would be thrust back into myself. Feel my hand upon her shoulder. Hear the words coming out of my mouth, “Mama, please...” See her tears, mucus, and snot. Watch the neighbors’ lights flickering on up and down our narrow street, gutters filled with dirty snow. Taste the bile rising in my throat, afraid I might vomit out the words I was afraid to say: *I thought it safe to love a mother...*”

Shelly Jones

Botany of a Warrior

Embroider thistle on her tunic for courage,
to prick her boldness on the battlefield,
to pierce her enemies' shield and armor.

Crush sage in her pockets for salvation,
to keep her safe in an unknown land,
to allay fears that bristle beneath her skin.

Dye her ribbons with coneflower, yarrow,
their petals aflame, a fiery aura will erupt
from her hair as she charges the fray.

Carve her name in black willow bark,
the wood swallowing her memory,
so she will be known for ages to come.

Plant thyme where her feet once trod,
lining the path with their lemony incense
so her spirit may find its way back home.

Stephanie Parent

Little Bones

My Mother, She Killed Me

Outside the cottage is a juniper tree
Where his mother's bones rest
Beneath branches with leaves like needles
Berries the color of the grayest skies

Inside the cottage, his stepmother stews
In her jealousy
She knows her husband's heart belongs
To those bones beneath the tree
She sees the loss in his eyes, the color
Of juniper berries

So, she lays a trap

My Father, He Ate Me

Father, Father, *why?*

From his stepmother he expects cruelty
But from his father he finds ignorance
The greater sin
The father who turns a blind eye
To everything but his own aching heart
The father who doesn't question
Why the meat tastes so bittersweet
And where his son has gone

My sister Marlene, gathered all my bones

She cries a river of tears
Till the soup needs no salt

Tied them in a silken scarf

Child's bones

Become bird bones
Hollow enough to float
To fly

Laid them beneath the juniper tree

She knows the power
Of a dead mother's wish
Alchemy, necromancy
Strange bloom come from blood
And salt

With his hollow bird bones
And his fragile feathers
And his pure, clear voice
The boy speaks the truths
He never could before

The boy born from a wish
Made beneath a juniper tree

A wish of snow
And blood
Death
And love

T.C. Anderson

Something Less Than Home

I feel my history is wanting
of a certain importance or interest,
for my past is mottled with
distrusted voices and
bonds of weak blood,
but it falls to little more than
an empty bowl of dust and snakes
lined with shriveled shreds of hope,
a place I could never bring myself
to call home.

A forest with a bed and a fireplace,
an autumn of memories and promises never said,
a roomful of accidents and murmurs
of birthed beliefs and broken blood,
of righteous secrets and growing ghosts...

I will not find tomorrow here.
This is something less than home

