

# THE RAVEN REVIEW

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# THE RAVEN REVIEW

Volume III, Issue I

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*Anoushka Chauhan*

## **On Pre-emption**

If you train your ears to the  
frequency of the quieter, you

hear the jingling of keys in the  
next ghost town, the rustle of

the moth dying by dawn. If you  
train your eyes to detail, there glows

something in the fissures of your  
palm, amid the wrinkles around

your mother's eyes, in the gap  
between my teeth. It's light. It's

trapped. See, every city is too small  
to house a dream of such form. I

was seven and confused when I  
learnt a light-year is a measure

of distance, not light. You're only  
four hundred and seventy-two cities

away. That's a trillion lights. That's  
still less than a light-year away. Look,

look at the courtroom, the plea, the  
punitive damages. The dust motes lining

the files that contain the confidential.  
Listen, we only have enough time as

we choose to love in. The sparrows  
only speak the language of mothers and

reason as much as I do. The river is not  
deep enough to swallow everything before

swimming to the other bank. We are  
barely grown. We have never held

enough light in our hands to be  
this fearful of the dark anyway.

*Barclay Ann Blankenship*

## **Wishbone**

I watched a documentary  
about an octopus with a short life.  
To make more of herself,  
she had to die, she knew. She knew more than me.  
To give and give until all her giving dissolved  
from her limbs, now just swaying in the current,  
the most strange cloud passing. She's too weak  
to hunt, too weak to fight.  
The sharks are swift with  
her grey body, calling, "Come, I'm almost gone,"  
and the creatures will have their way. Tranquil  
while they pull at her meat, ripping in chunks, taut but fleshy still.  
And she holds no malice,  
no contempt, for their desperate taking. The small creatures come too,  
and are worse in their own innate way, burrowing  
her life for their own.  
She used to be purple.  
Now, only a faint resemblance while she makes her last flowing dance  
underneath the white caps.  
She used to play with the diver  
she trusted.  
Now, her tentacles are grazing the ocean floor, disrupting the still sand  
in accident, in resolution.  
And I cry for her,  
the most true ghost the sea ever knew.  
Even with bits of her missing,  
digesting in some other creature's darkness,  
she'll dance on.  
She'll dance on.



*Brielle Amick*

**Winter**

The leaves have long gone, blown in the frigid winds  
The snow will soon be settling in,  
And when the cold takes its hold, her heart feels like it's growing cold  
Something about the longer days and winter greys  
Makes her smile slowly fade  
She longs for the sun to thaw the frost  
Because she's afraid of being lost  
They say it's just seasonal, but she might not make it through this season whole

*Catherine Coundjeris*

## **Snow Dream**

Childhood treks through the  
snow enchanted woods discovered  
animal footprints traveling  
past a stream to the great white oak  
Old and big the last of its kind.

A circle of white birch  
raised graceful arms and bare heads  
to the steel grey sky,  
dancing among the buried leaves  
under the new drifts of snow.

At the brink of the woods  
deer stood still watching me and  
I them as sleek crows circled,  
calling to one another.  
A fox nearby hunkered down.

Now I follow old trails...  
above a red-tailed hawk hunts.  
Snow birds scatter further into the woods.  
Old phantoms walk beside me  
In my snow dream.

*Cynthia McDonald*  
**Childhood Demons**

Tread lightly  
there are demons here  
behind the pleasant smiles.  
Often we go hungry but  
today there is a feast laid out  
a beautifully roasted turkey  
lovely soft and luscious rolls with  
butter to melt and run down the sides to  
coat my fingers.  
I paste a smile on my face to hide the fear  
I must not let the demons know I know they're here  
I pour gravy into the divot in my mashed potatoes.  
Bright cranberries on my plate divert my gaze  
from the stares  
I know they feel that I suspect.  
Mother serves a beautiful pie  
it is pumpkin and there is whipped cream and  
as she slices every piece  
She looks away from me because she always does.  
Stepfather meets my gaze and I see the red flare in his eyes  
They know I know  
This family has never been mine  
and I have always lived in fear.  
Today, the feast is served and  
It is not on the table.  
I push my chair back and try to hide the trembling  
In my hands  
excusing myself so politely but they smile  
I bolt for the door the sick taste of pumpkin coats my mouth  
the sound of a chair falling to the floor and pounding footsteps and  
I glance frantically over my shoulder as my hand finds the coolness  
of the doorknob  
I turn it and glimpse the safety of daylight.  
Stepfather hits the door hiding the sun  
grinning down at me with sharp teeth he always had  
I am trapped with them forever

I have always known that  
there were demons here

*Duane Anderson*

**Softly the Rain Falls**

The rain falls lightly  
so that no one notices,  
yet streets lie wet  
streams flow against curbs  
and puddles cover grass

silently the rain continues  
falling,  
onto my mind if falls  
and covers it with a mist  
a morning dew on my forehead

my head  
a fresh grape on a vine  
unpicked.

*Echo Quinn*  
**The Bridge**

Haunting shadows,  
Stormy skies  
This world tells her  
Nothing but lies,  
She's tired of the  
Shadows, pain and fear  
She wants to be anywhere but here.  
As tears spill onto her weary, scarred face  
She crosses the bridge  
Hoping to find a better place.

*Edward Lee*

## **Erasure**

Only in an abstract, distant sense does Jonathan know he will remember this day for the rest of his life, almost like an echo of a sound that has yet to be made and yet heard all the same, for when he tries to consider the rest of his life as it is at that moment—and he does not try too hard, neither capable or eager to dwell too deeply—he only can see the end of this day, and the hours of the coming night that will be empty of sleep and full of thoughts he does not want to entertain. Tomorrow both exists and does not exist, and, in its existence and non-existence, it is equally terrifying and almost soothing.

When he sees his daughter run towards him, he attempts to pull his mind from dwelling on the night ahead and the thoughts it will contain, and the individual barbed holes—abysses with teeth, he sometimes thinks of them—each of those thoughts hold at their centre, and though not entirely successful, he feels his world slightly right its axis as she jumps into his arms and shouts, “Daddy!” loudly into his ear; there is a kind of erasure here, he knows—and he knows all about erasure, or at least the need for it, the desire - his daughter only knowing him as “Daddy” and not by his name, a removal of everything he is, in her eyes and mind, but his role as her father, though her erasure is unconscious and harmless while his own is deliberate and swollen with harm.

He has not seen her for almost four weeks, or twenty-six days to be precise, the longest he has ever gone without seeing her since she was born seven years ago, a situation he feels is as unnatural as it is heart-breaking. The last time he saw her it was only for a few minutes—he could not hold his tears at bay, or the howl of pain that would accompany those tears, any longer than that and he had not wanted her to see him in such a way, or even worse, frighten her—as he collected some clothes and toiletries from the family home. Three days after that day he checked himself into the psychiatric ward of the local hospital, his hands shaking as though in spasm, his mind a roiling coil of fire, and his throat still sore from the tie he had tried to hang himself with, only finding sense—or, more apt perhaps, sense finding him—when his daughter’s face had flashed before his eyes even as bursts of white flame began to dance in his vision, causing his fingers to scratch at the soft silk pulled tight, guilt and regret warring inside him at what he had been willing to do to erase himself from the world, to quiet the roar of broken noise in his head and heart. Two weeks passed in that place, and it is two weeks he does not want to dwell on, though he knows, in a less abstract way, that not a single day will pass when he does not think of that ward with people who, while more broken than him, had been broken for so long they had made a sort of peace with their cracked and fragile psyches, making them appear less broken than he was; one of the thoughts that keeps him awake at night—one among many, all seemingly wider than his mind can contain—is that maybe he is more broken than he knows himself to be and those other poor souls in the hospital appeared less broken than he was because they were in fact less broken.

Over his daughter's shoulder, he sees his wife walk towards him, and it is this he will remember for the rest of his life—Jonathan, surprising himself and possibly even his wife, will live into his 70s, at which point he will pass suddenly, almost painlessly, walking up the stairs of his rented house he lives in alone, as he has lived alone since the end of his marriage, the love he still holds for his wife, even after everything, the second last thought he knows, the very last one being of his daughter and how proud he is at the wonderful life she has made for herself—not her walking towards him, though he feels a shard of pain twist laboriously in his heart at the sight of her, a pain somewhat akin to the brief burst he will feel as he sinks to his knees on the stairs when he is seventy years of age, but because she will not walk away and leave them on their own, keeping them both in her eye-line as they walk to the nearby playground. She will do the very same thing the next four times he sees his daughter—all outdoors, in the presence of crowds, and all dictated by his wife, her choosing the days and the times—after which she will text him two days before he is next to see his daughter, telling him that their daughter can now stay over with him one night every second weekend. He knows her thinking behind this of course, and it disgusts him that she could think his crippling need to cease his existence, to erase himself and all the noise and fire of his mind, a need which long predates him meeting his wife, one which lies relatively dormant inside him until some event or action “triggers” it, like a bullet waiting to be fired—in this case, his wife leaving him for a man she had been engaged in an affair with for the last two years of their marriage, the pride with which she admitted this like a second wound inflicted in the middle of the initial wound caused by her informing him she was leaving—could ever mutate into a need to harm his daughter, but he does not have the strength, either physically or mentally, to argue this or anything with her, not at that moment, and not for years to come, all his energy directed towards surviving the depression that has plagued him for as long as he can remember. He knows of course that the argument could be made that his suicide would, if not physically, at the very least mentally, harm his daughter, casting a heavy shadow over her life, but he does not want to dwell on this, nor the guilt he still feels, and will always feel, that he had been so willing to end his life, regardless of the effect it would have had on her, his erasure of himself leaving a mark on her being that would never completely disappear; it will be a need he will never be able to discard, but he will never try to act upon it again, mostly through medication, regular therapy sessions, and shrinking his life down to his daughter and a couple of close friends, thereby reducing the chances of finding himself in any “triggering” situations.

In the months to come, as they begin the long process of dismantling a life together, via solicitors, while still forever connected through their daughter—after the divorce the only communication between them will concern their daughter—this awareness of his wife's all too apparent opinion of him, of the danger she imagines he poses towards his daughter, will adversely affect his recovery, as too will the dismantling process itself, each letter from his solicitor like a bomb he knows will explode in a fury of blinding light and shrapnel but not exactly when it will do so. His wife will even go so far as to use his stay in the hospital, along with everything he has ever told her about his depression—all tales told, true and unvarnished,



near the start of their relationship, as they stood on the cusp of admitting their love for each other, almost like a warning both to her and himself—against him to explain her actions both before the end of their marriage and after, even going so far as to slightly alter moments of their life together to better suit her narrative, not necessarily painting him as a monster but as someone who it was difficult and occasionally stressful to live with; “I sometimes feared I would come home and find him dead,” she will say at one stage, the words conveyed to him through his solicitor, and he will have to leave the room and rush to the bathroom to cry and vomit, his breakfast of that morning scalding his throat and his tears burning his eyes, his very heart twisted inside him at the words, and, also, he cannot deny, though he will admit it no one, a sense of horror that this was how she might have genuinely felt, that he could have, however unintentionally, inflicted this upon the woman he had loved from the very moment he had set eyes upon her at a mutual friend’s birthday party so many years before, her smile all he could see when he was introduced to her, her voice all he could hear when she said his name.

Jonathan holds tightly to his daughter as tears threaten in his eyes, for a moment believing—as he has believed many times over the past few weeks, even as a deeper, more primal part of his mind mocks him for these moments as nothing more than magical thinking—that his wife’s relationship with this other man will soon come to an end, and she will allow him, Jonathan, to return home and the three of them can be a family again. Because that is what they are, after all, a family, a unit of three, three made one. Again, in that deep primal part of himself, that part that can dispassionately examine all the evidence laid before him, like, he imagines, a coroner standing before a body they are about to cut open—and, that primal, cold, knowing part of him cannot help but see their marriage as a still corpse lying between them, the sweetness of its decay beginning to sting their noses—he knows it is a cruel hope, a wounding hope even, but if he learnt anything in the hospital, apart from the fact that he will never go back there again, not willingly at least, it is that even a cruel hope is a better than no hope, especially when suicidal thoughts are all too capable, eager almost, of slipping into the absence left by that missing hope, spreading possessively into every corner of that empty space; he will hold onto this hope for as long as he can, and while it will wound him, and deeply so, it will also, paradoxically, aid him, its mania-infused energy pushing him to endure the nights—those nights devoid entirely of sleep—when the most senseless thoughts make perfect sense.

Jonathan lowers his daughter to the ground, and she runs towards the playground, calling to him to come and push her on the swings. He does so, and in that movement, turning to follow his daughter, he turns his back on his wife. The sharp pain in his chest eases while simultaneously his hope of her taking him back increases, passing from almost shapeless possibility to solid surety—he even feels his breath catch in his throat—and by the time he reaches the swing where his daughter sits waiting, looking at him as though she has been waiting for hours, her head tilted in the very same way that her mother tilts her head when looking at him—she is looking more like her mother with every passing year and less like him—he tells himself that everything is going to be okay, everything, eventually, will be okay.

*Jackie Chou*

**Dancing Girl**

I look human in every way  
Ebony hair, silver evening gown  
reflect the rotating mirror ball  
I feel human to the touch  
My hand, which you take  
soft flesh and warm blood  
My black lashes cast shadows  
over distant brown eyes  
My feet shuffle mechanically  
to the familiar beats  
A ghost silhouette  
shifting and turning  
upon the wooden dance floor

*Jakob Angerer*

## **Ritual**

It wakes when he does,  
after a night of rotting  
beneath his bed  
its groping tentacles  
paused, reaching for his head

it follows him throughout the day  
and he hears it growling  
low and prowling,  
lurking around every corner  
waiting for smiles and hope  
to feed upon, chanting;  
*bring him to his knees*  
*unless he prays in threes*

slimy black tentacles reach up  
from the plughole in the sink  
and he retches from the stink  
as they grip his face to force  
him to meet eyes with the abyss

when night comes it moves faster  
and he'll hear it climbing the stairs,  
heaving and belching,  
wet and squelching--  
closer and closer  
he shuts his eyes  
praying praying praying  
he'll be free in his dreams.

*Jiah B.*

## **Pigment**

they were the dusk sky,  
a streaky purple  
of the royals bred in dust.  
trickling opaque lacquer of  
ardent loyalty,  
and to the bone they rebelled  
for their darling dearest.  
the one who waved brushes with purpose,  
palette in hand, willfully ignorant.  
the one who found beauty in the ugly,  
bloody and throbbing.  
the paint smothered them,  
like a chokehold in an embrace.  
it was comforting  
for they liked being loved; deserved it.  
how will they ever survive  
when the love runs out?  
like a splash of water onto a dewy canvas;  
until one day it did.  
out their body and into the trench  
with the vicious rainwater of the storm.  
left them devoid of affection,  
bare and dry.  
they saw their veins for the first time, the blood,  
a blazing fire  
pumping through, the air in their lungs  
like a leap off a height.  
their life flashed before their eyes.  
they saw all the portraits and stains and frames,  
rotten, hollow, dismantled.  
the grotesqueness of it all;  
love that rendered them impaired.  
tears washed away the last traces of lilac under their eyes  
and suddenly they were the dawn.  
tender pink emerging from the gloaming,  
uneasy yet audacious.  
paint strokes didn't define them anymore, couldn't.

pigments started shifting;  
and pinks and blues didn't make purple,  
it made a muddy venom; a thick tar of misfortune.  
vile paint brushes were snapped in half and  
the splinters pricked their skin,  
drawing out crimson in protest.  
but fire colors empowered them now  
and there they stood, rooted in dust again  
without violet enamel.  
in a pool of red, something of their own,  
and they survived.  
breathed, bled and screamed.  
they survived.

*Karly White*

## **Haunted House**

In this haunted house,  
There's no phantoms in the corridors  
Poltergeists in the pantry  
The walls don't bleed,  
And the mirror only shows your face,

Puffy from crying,  
Silent in the bathroom,  
Trying to quiet your tears,  
Because the insults never end.

Because you can't live up to the dead,  
Who are felt like a presence.  
Not ghosts,  
But somehow,  
Manifest all the same.

You can't measure up,  
Your perfect competition,  
Who never had a chance to disappoint,  
Escaped the mortal coil,  
Left you to bear the scars on your own;

On your arms.  
The doors aren't locked,  
But you're trapped all the same.  
There are no barred gates,  
But you can't drive away.

And there's nowhere to go.  
No monsters under the bed,  
No horrors from the cosmos.  
Just the people who promised to  
Love and care.  
And the wounds that you bear,  
In exchange  
For breathing the wrong air.

*Kavita Prasad*  
**Infinite Being**

You are an infinite being,  
Expand the wings and explore the heights,  
The heights of aspiration,  
Depths of your vision...

Feel the pleasure of satisfaction,  
The excitement of new idea.  
The idea eager for your touch  
The virgin paper is craving for new words...

The pure white serenity of thoughts,  
Mist of a Poet's heart  
Thou indigo, sweet and fragrant,  
Fill it with my colours dear, pour my love on paper...

*Kendra Whitfield*

## **Half-Life**

When my dad was fifty-six years old,  
He walked off the Beverly Bridge and  
Into the North Saskatchewan River.

He wrote what he knew on the hearts of the  
Women who loved him,  
And what he knew was  
Vanishment.

He disappeared his whole lifetime.  
It's what his people did.

When my dad was three years old,  
His mother abandoned her brood of five and  
Their coal-mining, farmer father.  
She went to Russia,  
She went to Stalin  
She went to revolutionize a world she could not change.

When my dad was six years old  
She returned.  
The writing was already on his heart:  
“Disappearance is how you deal with disillusion.”

When my dad was nineteen years old,  
He vanished the first time.  
Stumbling into darkness after crashing the car  
On the way home from a dance,  
He enlisted.  
Not help, but into an army during a war,  
Writing on the heart of the girl who carried his son  
That the greatest disillusion is love.

When he was twenty-eight years old,  
He came West.  
Nothing in his suitcase but sharp knives and  
Coal dust.



Whose heart did he engrave with vanishment then?

When I was fourteen,  
It was mine.

*K.R. Everett*

## **Rot**

The smell of dirt, mixed with rot and a newly dewed rain, fused with the mist. It felt thick and dreadful as it hung heavily in the cool morning air, weighing down on me. Freshly mowed grass stuck to the soles of my bare feet, the damp clumps looking like chewed food that had been spit up.

I came here every morning like this, dragging my feet through the mud and dirtying my clothes. All the little things I could do to draw her notice; my mother said I was “communing with nature.” I found that pretentious. She knew better but chose to save face.

The box was made mostly of wood that had been picked away slowly by an onslaught of bugs over the past three years, but it held together. The wiring was only lightly touched with rust, it was never quite pristine but aged as I had aged, staggeringly slowly.

At this point, it was only halfway decomposing. The bones protruded through clumps of dirt and feathers held barely by a bit of skin clinging to the delicate carcass. If it weren't for how perfectly it held its shape, the dead thing would have been unidentifiable.

I could see the shining little thing that it was before, perched on a branch, posing for any that cared. I could feel the phantom of my mother's hand on my back as she pushed my spine in, as she always had, and hear her voice as it left a hot touch on my ear telling me to stand up straight. No one likes a sloucher.

The grass was sticky and wet and completely uncomfortable, but I lay down regardless. The sky is blue, I've been told that that is a universal truth. Here the sky was grey, or I was color blind. The answer of which truth was real, ultimately, does not matter.

The dead things ribs were among the bones that grew out of the rotting flesh that remained. I could feel the curve of my ribs as I ran my fingers down their length. Yesterday, I was at 110. When the number ran across the small glowing screen, I felt a tightness in my chest. My mother had some words. If my ribs had shown as beautifully as they do in the box, would I be seen as satisfactory then?

The eye sockets of the dead thing had long been picked bare but still I gazed into them. It gazed back at me with an emptiness, gauging at mine till we matched. Two sets of empty eyes. It's for the best; my eyes were the sort of brown that wasn't beautiful. Spiteful eyes, my mother called them. I imagine the dead thing must have felt something like pain when its eyes were lost. I could feel something like pain, I could feel the stinging of fingers probing my eyes with their dry padding. She never could hide how dark they were, but she always tried.

The sky that is grey or blue might as well be the ashen brown of the box beside me; the wire walls could wrap around and hold me just within the surface of dirt that hugs the rotten things within. The bugs that crawl in to feed upon the feast of blood and bones I leave for them could then caress my skin and pull at the forms that struggle to hold me together. Instead of it, there could be me, and I could fall apart like carefully woven cloth unravelling. I would be tragic

in a complex sort of way. But the dead thing looks so free, so beautiful... Falling to ruin in this box, it looks so complete.

*Lily Henning*

**Chilled to the Heart**

Cold, dry hands.  
The sandpaper feeling,  
Sending tingles down to my toes.  
There's such a chill,  
My whole body tenses and freezes.  
My hands turn purple.  
No warmth of blood is being let through.  
I shake,  
I tremble.  
My writing becomes sloppy.  
The cold feeling creeps up my arms,  
All the way to my heart.  
And all the warmth seeps out of my body,  
The chill makes me violently shake,  
And the lit candle I knock over,  
burns my love letter to ashes.  
And I make no move to stop it.

*Linda Crate*

## **Until the Universe Said No**

there's this  
big, heavy  
empty  
where you're  
meant to be

in my heart,

but i am no  
stranger to voids

my father left one  
when he was absent  
from my life and try  
as my stepfather may  
even after adopting  
me that void remained;

i have so much love to give

whilst being absent  
of love I'll never receive—

almost as if the universe  
loves paradoxes and coincidences,  
and i love surprises;

you were someone i never knew  
i needed until the universe  
told us both no.

*Lorraine Caputo*

**Receiving the Message**

Several dark hours  
before the dawn  
I awoke from light dreams

& stood sheltered beneath  
the arcade, watching  
the quiet rain intensify

& I knew a change  
had come

In the weak illumination  
I received word  
of her passing  
several hours before

The rain-soaked lines  
snapped, fizzed together  
time & again

As I sent my thanks, my thoughts  
my Light across the  
many miles between my exile  
& her family....

*L.R. Buckwalter Cunningham*

**Es normal**

What is the use of Speculation  
if you are still,  
    full of sorrow  
and Vampires.  
metaphysically transfixed,  
    in this garage at night  
chirping in  
a language,  
our own, our young,  
an obscure species;  
    for me you have died, and I do not know yet,  
in my lowly reason,  
a theory as to  
    Why.

*Martin Toman*  
**Graveyard**

I was born in Graveyard; raised here. The town got its name on account of the gift the city councillors gave you when you came of age. When you turned 18, they'd present you with your plot in the cemetery. It was kind of comforting to know where your bones would end up, but there was a catch. You would have to dig your own grave in advance. The custom was to do it on the day you were given your patch. Once you were done, they'd put a cover over the hole to keep it dry. You learnt fairly young to step carefully in the cemetery and going there at night was an invitation to fall into a hole and break a leg.

Our town became something of a tourist attraction. You'd be working your job and people from out of town would ask you where your grave was, where you'd take your long dirt nap. I'd never tell them. I always felt that my grave belonged to me, that it was my place. I called the cemetery tourists grave robbers. Other people from town felt differently. You'd see them standing next to their spot, cheesy grin in place with a tourist who was taking a selfie, sometimes theatrically pointing a finger downwards. When I saw these people hamming it up, I would think about running over and pushing them into their graves, covering them with the mounded dirt next to it, patting it nice and flat with the back of a shovel. Maybe I'm just over-protective of my place in the earth.

That's how I met Martha. My grave brought us together. At the time I was working for the town council, cleaning Graveyard's common spaces. I'd spend the day driving a truck from place to place, blowing leaves, or erasing graffiti, keeping the mayor and the various councillors from getting complaints that Graveyard was anything other than perfect.

I saw Martha in five different places that day. It wasn't like she was inconspicuous. Tall, dark haired, slender. A red cardigan, a floral summer dress. I noticed her in the central park sitting on a bench writing in a journal, then in the library gardens, standing outside the gelato store, eating in a café, and then finally in the cemetery. My last call of the day was to collect the trash that tourists had left by the gravesites, food wrappers, crystals, candles and other nonsense, other bits of junk. Martha was leaning on the fence, her journal open, writing where she stood. I walked the perimeter first, staking pieces of garbage before venturing into the cemetery proper. Even with a pretty girl watching I knew better than to be distracted. I didn't want to end up in someone else's hole.

"So, what's a girl got to do to see a boy's hole these days?"

I turned around. The sun was settling into the golden hour behind her, almost giving her a full body halo. She smiled, held out her hand. Part of me wished I was carrying a leaf blower so I could lift her dress and see her panties, but I held out my hand instead and shook hers.

"I don't just show anyone my grave, you know."

"But you have one; you're a local?"

"Yeah, I do." I waved my arm vaguely towards the other side of the cemetery. "Over that way."



“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Well, what’s a girl got to do to see a boy’s hole these days?”

I laughed, even though I hated the grave robbers. I had the presence of mind to know that if Martha wasn’t pretty, wasn’t wearing a floral dress, and wasn’t standing with the sun behind her then I would probably have wished her a good day and finished my shift, but a pretty girl can sometimes make you bend your principles.

“I tell you what: I’ll finish up for the day and then if you have dinner with me, we can eat dessert by the side of my grave.”

Talk about an offer too good to refuse. I’m still surprised she said yes.

It might disturb you to know that from time to time I visit my grave, pull the cover off, and climb inside. I like to lie on the cold earth and look up at the rectangle of sky above me. Sometimes, it’s a clear blue, sometimes, it’s grey. Sometimes, I even do it at night. I open and close my eyes, the night sky disappearing and reappearing with the movement of my eyelids.

An hour or so after we split the bill at dinner Martha, and I lay side by side at the bottom of my grave. The stars blazed above us, the burning suns of a million galaxies tracing an arc across the sky. Our shoulders and elbows pressed against each other, our discarded clothes lying at the edge of the grave; the floral dress, the red cardigan. The air and earth felt cold, but where we touched the sensation was warm and alive.

It wasn’t long until we got married. We were going to do it anyway, but we thought we should before she started to show. The town gave her a plot next to mine when she became a citizen of Graveyard. I watched her dig her hole, neatly piling the dirt in the space that would separate us when we passed. As she disappeared her way into the ground, the scoops of dirt flying over the edge, I looked at my own gravesite, the place where my flesh and bones would be consumed by the soil. And I remembered the day we met, how we became a couple, all the things that happened that night.

It still makes me smile. In the place where everything that is me will become something else and disappear, there was a moment someone was created. Life born in death, a spark in the darkness, a star igniting in the cosmos.

*Michael Cooney*

## **My Mother Killed My Father**

After a week or so, the neighbors sent word to the sheriff. Some said it was the smell of burning flesh that tipped them off. Others claimed they knew that Mrs. Druse was lying when she kept repeating the very same words to everyone who stopped by the farm: “My man has left. He’s gone away. I don’t know where he went.” Mrs. Willis, who belonged to the Baptist Church with the Druses, said it was the look in the eyes of the seventeen-year-old Mary that told her that something terrible had happened at the isolated farmhouse.

Jacob Timmerman, who testified at the trial, had his own view of the matter. “I could see they were both bruised up regular, Roxy and her girl. When Bill didn’t show up, I figured she had finally killed him.” Timmerman had paused for a moment. “He deserved killing, in my opinion.” Both prosecution and defense rose to object.

After the trial, Timmerman sold his farm near Jordanville and settled downriver from the thriving mills at Little Falls. He bought a farm, smaller than the old one, with twenty good acres of rich black soil. Soon, he grew prosperous enough to spend his idle winter days in Klock’s Tavern.

“Old Bill Druse was a bastard, truth to tell,” Jacob Timmerman said one bleak afternoon when Frank Shall dropped by. “I told the jury up in Herkimer that he deserved what he got, but they didn’t want to hear it. He was a son-of-a-bitch, and that’s the truth.”

Shall had spent the day breaking the will of a rich old farmer. “You think they were wrong to hang Roxalana Druse?”

“Here’s the way I see it,” Timmerman leaned forward and dropped his voice. “It was December, mind you, and cold and dark as the grave. Bill staggers out of bed, half-drunk from the night before, and right off starts bitching. He’s yelling that the eggs are runny or some such. Then he smashes the plate into her face and goes out to milk the cows. Roxy wipes off her face, used to this kind of thing. She wraps a ragged old shawl around her shoulders and goes to the well to pump some water. When the pail is full, she calls out to her daughter, who’s still not up. ‘Mary! Come here and give me a hand with this pail of water,’ she says.

“‘Mary,’ she calls again but the girl don’t answer. Roxy’s shoulder is sore from an arm-twisting Bill had given her the day before. It’s hard for her to carry the pail back into the kitchen, and the water is sloshing onto the floor. She goes to knock on Mary’s door. There’s no latch, but the mother never goes into her daughter’s room, unbidden.

“Finally, the girl pulls open the door, a makeshift arrangement of boards. Her hair is uncombed, and she wears a nightgown of her mother’s. Her eyes tell the story. Roxy asks the girl, ‘did he do something to you?’ She couldn’t have put more than that into words. Maybe Mary nodded, or maybe she didn’t have to. Maybe Roxy says to the daughter, ‘he won’t do it again.’ This time Mary definitely nods her head, rapidly up and down.

“‘He won’t do it again,’ the mother repeats, with no clear idea yet of how she can protect the girl. Something very bad is going on if you get my drift.

“Well, Roxy flings about for something to say. ‘We’ll wait ‘til dinner,’ she says. ‘Your Pa will be back from the fields. We’ll just wait for dinner, you and me.’ Mary nods, not saying a word.

“Mrs. Druse chooses a couple of pork-chops from the smokehouse and cooks them up just the way the old man likes them, with plenty of gravy and onions. She don’t eat. She waits to see what else he’s gonna say, maybe one word that’ll keep her from doing the drastic that’s growing on her mind. Finally, Bill stops chewing and wipes his mouth with his hand. ‘Where’s that gal?’ he asks. ‘She oughta be here at the dinner table.’

“Mary comes quietly down the stairs. He can’t read the expression in his wife’s eyes, but whatever he sees there, he don’t like it. ‘Don’t you be raising your eyes to me, woman. I’ll teach you some proper respect, you and that bitch gal of yours,’ he says. He pushes back the chair and stands up from the table. Balling his fist, he moves toward his wife, who backs up nearly into the red-hot wood stove. Behind him, Mary lifts the ax that had been resting in the corner and brings it down. Blood is everywhere, splattered across the floor, the table, the women’s dresses. Roxy gently takes the axe from Mary’s hands. ‘Go to your room, Mary. I’ll take care of him now,’ she says.

“Dragging her husband’s body across the snow into the barn while Mary falls asleep, bloody dress and all, Roxy cuts Bill up with the same ax as the girl used on him. She chops and chops, breaking the body apart at the joints. She takes the pieces to the pig pen and throws them to the hogs. ‘Mr. Druse always said pigs’d eat anything,’ she said once to me when I visited her in jail. She had a little smile when she said it.

“Then she goes inside to wash down the floor, the chairs, and the table. She puts her dress and the old man’s clothes into the wood stove and lights a fire. Later, she manages to undress Mary and wash her off. She burns Mary’s dress, as well. Before the sheriff comes out to the farm six or seven days later, she sits on the bed next to Mary. ‘I killed him, Mary,’ she tells the girl. ‘That’s all you need to know. Just keep saying, ‘My mother killed my father.’ Say it, now. Say it.’

“Mary says nothing. ‘Say it, girl, say it.’ Finally, after hours of pleading, Mary speaks: ‘My mother killed my father. My mother killed my father. My mother killed my father.’

“The trial was a great sensation in Herkimer County. Biggest story since the Civil War, as far as most people were concerned. People came in carriages from all over the county for each of the three days that it took. Brought picnic baskets and made a regular party of it.

“I was there in the courtroom, and I heard it all. They cut me off when I was trying to give my testimony, to tell the truth of what happened out there on the Druse place. Mary testified in a voice so low that the county attorney had to repeat very loudly for the jury the few words that she used. I couldn’t hear her, but the prosecutor told everybody that she said, ‘My mother killed my father.’

“On the day that Roxy was hung in the back yard of the county jail, the crowd was just about the largest I ever seen in Herkimer. When they asked her if she had any last words, she

looked out over the crowd and said as loudly as she could: 'I killed him. I know it's wrong and I hope I don't burn in hell, but I'm glad I done it.'

"Mary served a couple of years for accessory after the fact, as they put it. She took up religion in the new state prison for women and later on, she went out west where people say she took up with the Mormons."

"So, what was the upshot, Jacob?" Frank Shall asked him. "Was justice served?"

"All I know," Timmerman paused to spit tobacco juice into the fireplace, "is that that mother loved that girl as much as any mother ever loved a child. What does the Bible say, greater love has no man? Nor woman neither, as far as I'm concerned."

"Well maybe," said Shall, who years later was elected county judge and eventually shot himself.

*Muneeb Ilyas*

## **No Goodbyes**

The boy's song  
*where do you run?*  
Chasing the sky,  
So full of joy,  
*How does it end?*  
The violence of a sad goodbye,  
*Do you step your heart out?*  
Or you are just a star apart,  
Close enough to be so far away

The boy's song  
*and Tender eyes*  
Locked with temples of grief and dreams,  
*What do you know about a kiss?*  
When loops close between arms,  
Softly hugs the frozen tie,  
You yet see your bones tremble,  
When someone leaves,  
For light years of rehearsal,  
You yet grieve the same,  
*Oh, and tender?*

The boy's song,  
*Distance?*  
The length of an eye  
or measures of body lining  
Stretching to capture cities.  
And falls beforehand as you appear.  
*Well, who knows, do you?*  
The boy he sleeps a thousand nights,  
For *subah bakhair* it yet awaits,  
A farewell and some more to come.

The boy's song  
*No goodbyes*

*Nat Whiston*

## **First Blood**

I love this season the peace it brings,  
I hear in the distance the church bell rings,  
The leaves that paint the floor deep red,  
A fitting cover for the dead,  
Falling down across degraded tombs,  
Screeching of the angry crows that loom,  
Ivy twists around my feet,  
My heart in the quiet is like a loud drumbeat,  
Here I find my special place,  
Besides the corpses and headstones, I face,  
Waiting for October to arrive,  
The time when brown leaves thrive,  
When the dead are no longer forgotten,  
The fruit bought fresh no longer rotten,  
When masks are worn to ward off evil,  
Embracing a power that feels primaeval,  
I find peace in the cold,  
Held tight by the powers of old,  
A graveyard deserted how I like it best,  
To ignore reality and find my rest,  
The body is heavy, but I've got time,  
Eventually, my craft I'll soon refine,  
For now my victims will just share a grave,  
There is no soul left in which to save,  
Colours red and orange conceal my mess,  
That I've killed many before, no one will guess,  
Covered my clothes in splashes of blood,  
Mixed in with dirt and clumps of mud,  
As I walk the grounds on Halloween night,  
People see me in costume and horrible sight,  
Another year is nearly gone,  
But this year I intend to carry on,  
My body count is low by my spirits are high,  
And all it took was for a person to die

*Patrick Malka*

## **Three Memories of Mr. Halliday**

We met Mr. Halliday on the second day of grade 10.

Tall and broad with a surprisingly high voice, he greeted each of us at the door with a handshake and a good morning. He seemed confident, just shy of intimidating but when he spoke to the group, he shrank six inches, retreating into himself, into his own head.

After finishing his introduction to the course, Mr. Halliday projected a few review problems onto the screen and asked us to complete them in our notebooks. As we worked, he pulled a muffin out of his briefcase and broke half the top off, quickly crushing it into his mouth, stealing a moment to make up for a missed breakfast. As we worked, he suddenly coughed and inhaled quickly. I looked up, he was facing away from the class, his shoulders silently heaving. I looked around. Only I had noticed something was wrong. Then he took three long strides to the door and left the room. Then everyone was paying attention.

We stared at each other wondering what was going on, what we should do, if anything. It was perfectly quiet in the hallway other than a rhythmic thumping. A full minute passed. I stood and took a few tentative steps to the door when a loud cough and gasp broke the nervous silence of the classroom. I backed away and returned to my seat. A minute later, Mr. Halliday returned to the class. His brow sweaty, his face deeply flushed. His left eye now held a dense knot of broken blood vessels.

He walked over to his desk, put the muffin away and asked in a deeper, raspier voice, who would like to explain the first problem.

• • •

Mr. Halliday walked in one morning in October with a bandage across his left temple, extending halfway across his forehead. His light-blue V-neck sweater-stained brown with dry blood. The usual white noise of chatter that preceded the start of class immediately died away at the sight of him. My friend Ronnie, who had a pathological inability to not say what was on his mind, shot his hand in the air, ready to ask the obvious question. Mr. Halliday ignored him and turned his back to the class and, while writing out the day's agenda on the board, said "some of you may know that I walk to work every day. Today, someone thought it was a good idea to throw a glass bottle at my head from a moving car." He turned back around to face us, walked over to his backpack, removed the broken iced tea bottle from its side pocket and placed it on his desk.

"Sir, aren't you worried you might have a concussion?" Ronnie said, this time without waiting to be called on.

"Yes, but that can wait. We'll be reviewing how to graph the quadratic equation today so please take out your notes." When no one made a move for their books, he said "is there something wrong?"

I asked “Mr. Halliday, do you know who did it? I mean, this is assault, right?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Yes, you know who did it, or yes, it’s assault?”

“Yes,” he said.

As far as any of us could remember, he never spoke to anyone about it ever again. But the broken bottle remained on his desk until the holiday break.

• • •

Ronnie, Mary, David, and I were talking.

“Halliday wouldn’t believe in ghosts,” I said.

“What makes you so sure?” said the voice over my shoulder.

I didn’t realize he had been listening to our conversation.

“I’m sorry Mr. Halliday, I didn’t mean to speculate. We were just talking. It doesn’t seem like something you’d be into.”

“So, you’ve decided that not only do I not believe in ghosts but apparently, I’m also not into them?”

I looked around at the group I was talking to, every one of them now engrossed in some other tasks. Jerks.

“Can you come to my desk for a moment?”

The laughs were barely contained around me.

Mr. Halliday sat in his creaky chair and waited for me to reach the desk. When I did, he sat up and leaned forward.

“I want you to try to keep a straight face, okay? This story is for you. Your friends let you hang out to dry there so I don’t think they should get to hear it. Nod if you agree.”

I nodded.

“Officially, you’re right, I’m not into ghosts and I don’t believe in them.”

He paused. Stared at me.

“My daughter is a couple years younger than you. Her mother, my wife, died when she was just three so it’s just Jordi and me.”

He saw my eyes widen, wordlessly asking if he should be saying these things out loud. Saying these things to me. Hard enough to imagine teachers have lives outside of school, it’s even harder to image those lives have held any amount of relatable pain. Mr. Halliday, in particular, never spoke like this.

“How she died is not important. That part is not for you. Jordi is fourteen and already as tall as her mother. Spitting image. One night, a few years ago, Jordi came to see me in the middle of the night, backlit at my bedroom door. She said she had a weird dream. I asked if she needed company to get back to sleep and she said no. So, I put my head back down and heard her walk back to her room. But I felt like someone was there. I looked back and there was Jordi, backlit at my door. I asked again, are you sure you don’t want some company? All I heard was a whispered ‘no, not yet’ and I’ll tell you, I know a short, whispered sentence is not much to go on, but that



wasn't Jordi. It was familiar but not Jordi. I sat straight up and found myself alone in my room. I slept on my daughter's floor that night. I have yet to tell her why I needed to."

I said nothing. He leaned back in his chair.

"When you go back to your friends, it's up to you but I would tell them I gave you a boring speech about respect and left it at a warning."

• • •

It's been thirty-two years since I sat in Mr. Halliday's math class.

Reading his obituary, none of it sounds right, though I know he was a fine teacher and father.

All the time spent in his class, perfect attendance, and I only have these three memories of him, none of which involve math.

It doesn't feel like I should remember him.

But I do.

*Phrieda Bogere*

**Self to Self**

shedding old skin,  
wasting time on  
the inevitable,  
I'm sorry for being  
a disappointment.  
being stuck for 24 years,  
learning now,  
finally gathering  
the courage  
to crawl.

misery,  
hesitation,  
i could never  
trust myself.  
helplessness,  
a real lack,  
running on crumbs.  
friday morning,  
i had a panic attack,  
eyes welling up,  
gasping for air,  
betraying my body,  
operating at a deficit.

i shouldn't be  
making the same mistakes,  
but i'm still holding  
on to what's familiar,  
they keep saying  
it's going to kill me,  
now it's slowly killing me,  
i'm trying to find my way out.

*Rachael Almeida*

## **That Creeping Feeling**

The coffee is strong with hints of vanilla. The pastries are baked fresh each day. You come every weekday on the way to work teaching freshmen English for a cortado and croissant because you love supporting small business. As you wait for your order you have that feeling of someone standing too close behind you. You turn to politely request that they take a step back, but no one is there. You shrug it off as post-pandemic jitters. The feeling persists until you leave, the owner's eyes following your every move.

Your friends describe the café as quaint or cute, never eerie. The owner is a balding, unassuming man in his mid-fifties to everyone else. They see his pleasant smile at every customer as lovely. You see the smile doesn't reach his eyes and that he stares, at first you interpret it as his smile being that vacant eyed customer service; the one people adapt after years in the business and the staring as daydreaming. But sometimes you catch his eyes lingering with an unsettling hollowness that causes you to keep your interactions with him as brief as possible.

That uneasy feeling of someone just behind you happens every time you enter the café and only stops once you get into your car. You stop going to that particular café and change to the other local one a mile out of the way of your commute. Your friends invite you to go to the old one and you make excuses to not go such as needing to catch up on laundry or watching shows. You start suggesting other shops around the city, encourage them to try new things. Eventually, you run out of excuses and are pressured to go.

On the day you enter you breathe a silent sigh of relief that the feeling isn't there. You pay and join your group and the discomfort hasn't begun; you also notice the owner isn't in the building. You have a good time, talk with ease, actually enjoy your coffee and treat. It starts with the hairs on the back of your neck rising and your shoulders tightening. You try and fail to hide how uncomfortable you've become. Your friends pester you and you claim indigestion, one shot of espresso too many today. They laugh making lighthearted jokes about your caffeine addiction and say how unhealthy your relationship with it can be when you should know better at your age. You awkwardly laugh with them, trying hard to act normal.

The feeling is getting worse. The sensation of breath on your neck is new and by far the worse yet. And then it gets worse with the lightest touch of a finger on your left earlobe. You can't help but to jump and squeak in surprise. You know better than to look, you know nothing is there. Your friends give you a look of confusion and concern. You force a laugh and say your hair tickled and scared you. They laugh and make more playful jests and conversation continues. You wait ten minutes and after finishing your pastry before excusing yourself, claiming needing to grade essays. As you make your escape you see him, his eyes following you to your car.

The feeling begins persisting even at home. After a week of this you stop leaving your house, putting in a leave of absence at the college. You leave your phone off, same with your laptop. You feel like you're losing your mind. You keep thinking you see the owner in the corner of your eye whenever you open your door for deliveries, but he's never really there.

You try to tell your therapist the one time you go to an in-person session, but he tells you it is paranoia from your social anxiety induced from reentering society after such a traumatic shutdown of the nation. You don't go back. Weeks go by and your savings and emergency funds are running low. You reluctantly return to work. You hear whispers before entering rooms that you had a breakdown. The department head never presses you for an explanation of your disappearance, but you see the worry in her eyes.

The constant presence is still with you, and you have to try not to jump whenever someone accidentally sneaks up on you. You decide you're tired of being afraid and sign up for self-defense classes. It proves to be a good outlet for all your pent up, nervous energy. You start to genuinely feel better for the first time in the six months since the feeling first started. You finally agree to go in the general area of that café on a friend outing. Within half an hour and ten feet from the accursed place the presence is back with a vengeance. The feeling of a hand on your shoulder alerts you to what you already knew; he is watching. You have had enough; this has to end.

The next day, a Saturday, you psyche yourself up the entire day and arrive moments before closing. He doesn't protest. He seems as though he had been waiting for you, that you were expected. He gives you that empty smile and asks what it is you need. You glare and shout at him that he knows damn well why you're here and that you want answers. Why you? Why is he always watching, how is he making the presence?

His hollow eyes finally show an emotion: a deep, unending hunger. His pleasant smile becomes more of a bearing of teeth. His voice is low and sickly sweet as he takes a step forward.

"Because you are observant. You notice things."

You get into the first stance for defense, ready to fight him off if he tries anything. The feeling of hands gripping your shoulders and pressing down keep you in place as he closes the space between you. The scream never reaches your lips as his teeth make contact. The next day the café is closed for its monthly deep clean. After all, it is so hard to get blood out of tiling grout.

*Rachael Almeida*

## **The Garden**

How does the garden grow  
The best soil, perfect amounts of water, of sun  
By stubbornness and work  
Can nurture overcome nature's cruelty  
Does the garden have to be tidy and carefully pruned  
Or wild and spreading rapidly  
Is the gentle touch enough  
Or the constant vigilance  
Is what you thought a vegetable a flower  
Are warped plants acceptable  
Will the sheers cut off the imperfection  
Or will the garden be razed for something out of its control  
It is its own design

*Raquel Dionísio Abrantes*

**Winged-Woman**

The alder moon echoes vows made by lovers  
with the icy air on their lips.  
Such oaths seem impossible to shatter  
briefly illuminated by an otherworldly belief.

I fly, as a winged-woman, amidst the crows—  
soul guardians upon fields of moss and skeletons.  
Which ones to carry when purgatory is occupied?

The girl camouflaged in the fog curls up in her lament.  
I lift her chin and my wings shelter her from the blizzard  
raging inside her dainty cranium.  
I murmur my incantation, my quiescent song.

She inquires of me, “Are you my dark angel of abyss-like eyes?”

*Sandeep Kumar Mishra*

## **Ashes of a Suicide**

As we played curse of tongues so long,  
I go alone on worn out routes  
with lonely societal road  
after so many accidents in  
pathways of daily burdens

They injected “delusion of negation”  
in my identity veins,  
I although never had  
“flash flood of emotions”,  
I want to live even by eating  
char-grilled inner self

Now a black hole,  
I decided to be one with  
this constellation of  
migraine, tablets, syringe,  
backache and insomnia  
that had emerged around

I tied my wife’s red “sari”  
around my disconnected neck,  
a reflection of my smiling daughter  
was in the mirrored almirah  
Devil instinct drown into the  
deep vastness of human frailty against  
earthly emotions, an inner tide  
hit me down unconscious

How angry I was for not  
being among the dead?  
That kind of energy I needed  
to stay alive and I understood that

An ocean emerges from  
the death of the rivers

*Sejal Tayla*

## **Victory and Melancholy**

One of many  
Fought against the biggest melancholy.

Defeated and lost  
She never made her way back at all.

Many went in  
To bring her back out,

Fighting it together just as she once did  
With valour; the prophecy fulfilled.

Darkness surrounded their very being  
Until light shone from within their beings.

Soon they brought back their own  
To her old home.

People surround the one  
Thanking her for keeping safe their loved ones.

As she looks upon the sky  
The melancholy can only fly.

Victory bells fill the air  
It has been their prayer.