

# THE RAVEN REVIEW

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# THE RAVEN REVIEW

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*Amorak Huey*

## **Fairy Tale Romance**

A house so far down a dirt road beyond where the stars reach.  
We're on our own out here.

A new kind of darkness,  
it soaks into our bodies, leaves

us drenched in the absence of light.  
Shadows weigh as much as trees.

So quiet until it's not,  
hawk swoop and rabbit scream—

a mistake to ascribe meaning to hunger—  
how we learn to hold our tongues,

but what if we've already wasted the day  
while we each waited to be asked.

The work of keeping ourselves alive  
does not brook hesitation. At the end, what matters—

Did we love happily? Did we love ever? Will we love after?

*Anthony Hartill*

**Weight**

The weight of waking  
From a sleep that  
Was a dark and heavy sea

The weight of walking  
Through deserted streets  
Pressed down by a leaden sky

The clock weight  
Drags the passing hours  
And finally unwound

Thought weighs down  
Drags the pass of day  
Heavier and deeper

Until completely still

*Arvilla Fee*

## **The Willow Tree**

He held her hand;  
she held her breath,  
they vowed to love  
until their deaths  
beneath the branches  
of the willow tree.

Oh, so young,  
oh, so free,  
beneath the branches  
of the willow tree.

“Meet me here,”  
he said with tears;  
“when the moon is full,  
I will appear  
beneath the branches  
of the willow tree.”  
Oh, so young,  
and nearly free,  
beneath the branches  
of the willow tree.

She promised him  
she'd steal away,  
knowing her oath  
would pave the way  
toward the branches  
of the willow tree.  
Oh, so young,  
but never free  
except in branches  
of the willow tree.

And so...

The peasant's son

and the noble's girl,  
one with pennies  
and one with pearls  
traveled each  
from separate place,  
keeping watch  
on the full moon's face.

The night was still  
and void of sound  
until the air was split  
with baying hound.  
The noble's daughter  
screamed with fear;  
“Not my love,  
my darling dear!”

She ran as fast  
as feet could fly,  
but the night was ripped  
by anguished cry  
near the branches  
of the willow tree.  
“Oh, dear God,  
don't let it be,  
not in the branches  
of our willow tree.”

But, alas—

His life was over;  
her love was hung,  
and to his legs  
she wept and clung,  
beneath the branches  
of the willow tree.  
“Oh, my darling,  
how could he?”  
she sobbed  
beneath the willow tree.



The nobleman  
searched high and low  
but he would never ever  
know  
how his daughter met  
her fate  
on the night he killed  
her loving mate  
within the branches  
of the willow tree.

Some have said  
they see them there,  
hand-in-hand,  
without a care;  
their laughter floats  
upon the breeze  
beneath  
the willow-willow leaves.  
They are young,  
and forever free,  
safe in the branches  
of the willow tree.

*Benjamin A. Galitz*  
**Jewels of the Ego**

A dark, dirty alley is not the sort of place you would expect to see a wealthy businessman.

Yet Jack did not spend one second thinking about this. He rather focused obsessively on the jewelry on the man's hand. All other feelings were suppressed in favor of a desire to possess these jewels.

Many people had been stripped of their possessions or more in this alley. Jack was known for his obsessive craving for any loot that entered his perceived "territory." These jewels would prove no different. Jack's vision narrowed; all except the jewels themselves became an insignificant detail. The businessman kept walking through the alley; Jack did not notice his nervous looks and shaky walk. Instead, he spent his time sneaking through the shadows, setting up an ambush and fantasizing about the moment he would finally fulfill this craving. Like with everything he stole, Jack believed these gems to be what he needed to feel complete. But like with everything he stole, Jack was wrong.

When he was about to jump out at the man, he was himself grabbed from the shadows. The person who had captured him was stronger than anyone Jack had ever met. The insurmountable force exerted upon him felt inhuman, as did the person's skin and lack of breathing. But Jack's determination was equally inhuman. As the man was walking by and slowly out of sight, this confrontation would test an unstoppable force against unrelenting determination. Yet, while Jack's determination and perhaps, arguably, Jack himself would prove inhuman, only this strange person's strength proved superhuman. Upon realizing—while not admitting—the futility of his struggle, Jack turned his head to find that he could not comprehend this person's appearance. The person appeared in a blurred, unclear way in seemingly constant flux. In lieu of another representation, which was understandable for the mind, it represented the person's face as that of a mannequin: cold, unfeeling, yet a template for anything imaginable.

After remaining in this futile struggle for a few moments more, this person simply vanished. When the person vanished, the jewels regained the dominant position in Jack's mind. The world again faded and blurred, providing only a backdrop to these jewels, which were now far out of sight along with the man whose hands they were attached to. Jack sprinted after the way the man took and, surprisingly, eventually found him. He came closer and closer, but when he was just a few steps away, this strange person reappeared, dressed in a police uniform and struck Jack's knees with a baton. As he fell, the businessman appeared totally oblivious to the fact he was about to be robbed and a man was beaten but a few steps behind him. When Jack looked up from the ground, he saw the person again, now dressed in a clergyman's robe, speaking clearly and loudly in a heartless way while attempting to present a shallow helping and kind tone:

“Nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God, for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” Jack tried to stand up. He had already brought his back against a wall when he saw the person again, this time in regular street clothes, saying,

“You are everything that is wrong with the world.” When Jack finally stood up completely, he again saw the person in the robes of a judge. “May God have mercy upon your soul,” the person said. When Jack tried to run for the man with the gems again, the strange person grabbed him again. The person now stood before him without any disguise, simply in its unfathomable natural state.

“You think I want to subjugate you, but I can emancipate you. Emancipate you from the need to chase fortune at every opportunity. You fear me, but in truth, you need me. You cannot live without me,” said the person.

“Who are you?” Jack screamed.

“But a figment of your imagination, and yet more real than anything,” the person responded. “Destroy me if you will. I will still liberate your mind.”

Jack simply stood in front of the person for a few moments until the thought of the jewels reemerged. Jack struck the head of the person, not to follow his advice but to remove a threat to his theft of the jewels.

The person’s hard exterior shattered, and where there used to be an incomprehensible face, there was now a hole revealing a mirror. When Jack saw his face in the mirror, a sense of shame filled his mind. He had never seen himself before, and he did not like it. He now saw all the harm he caused, not just to others but even himself, in his pursuit of his animalistic instincts. The destruction of the strange person changed Jack more than the strange person himself. Instead of the jewels, he now thought of his guilt and shame. Strangely, this made him relate to other people more. He was a slave to the conscience instead of a slave of his impulse and longing. He traded animalistic instincts for shame and anxiety. He traded one chain for another. And like all others, he remains oblivious.

*Cailey Tarriane*

## **To Both Slaughter and Revive**

I step over his lean, lifeless form. His heart will regain its beat and thrive if I stay in this office for any longer. No thanks. Before he could have a chance of waking up, I dash to the hallways. I scan the corridor with my head like a robot. Screams will undoubtedly break out soon.

“What’s the rush?” My sister calmly approaches me and asks.

All I can think about is how her gaudy green blazer will contrast perfectly with the color of blood. My heartbeat dovetails in my throat; I can feel it tighten as I clench my fists.

“Please leave. You must depart right away.” A sensation flew from my fingertips. Funny how you can arrive too late for a predicament when the result was long expected. Her attire is instantly drenched in sticky, ketchup-like water. Damn it.

Green *does* go well with red. Crimson red. There is hardly any time for her eyes to broaden before she sags forward. Slipping out of her bloody pockets is a knife, and now it’s my turn to widen my eyes. Where did she get it from?

My legs jitter and crouch to inspect its blade. The sharpness entices me; I’m almost tempted to hug it and taste the flavor of life as it slips away. Maybe if it embraces me back, my body will loosen up and my throat can swallow normally again.

I take a deep breath to prepare myself to toy with it, just for a little while. A girl can have fun. Before this hallway explodes in ruthless cries, that is. My fingertips come close to consuming the knife and its fringes.

For a moment, my hands almost feel human.

I juggle my toy as it dances around my feverish fingers, but suddenly, a notion stops me. I return the knife to its fallen owner because I can no longer play with such a humane weapon. Not when my sister has only been gone for a precious minute, slain, but holding on, and as it turns out, pocketing vengeance for me all along. Literally pocketing. Vengeance that was packaged in a small, sharp-edged object. If I die from its blade, then who will wake her up?

*Catherine Cuypers*

**Nuclear**

Welcome home,  
here we will feign normalcy.

Bombs scatter like a downpour,  
torrents of emotional distraught.

Surely you can wipe your feet  
before you enter our humble abode.

Don't mind the eggshells like shrapnel,  
it's a sensory playground for the children,

as we raise our voices  
through paper thin walls.

Ignore the bomb shelter space  
of our youngest's room.

Where the kids cower in corners,  
when our words are loaded ammo.

Those moments in the trenches  
when we're not man enough,

to press the barrel between their brows,  
and shoot at their bare backs instead.

Thank you for visiting,  
mind your step on the way out.

Please don't tell the neighbors what you saw,  
we'd hate to be the talk a few streets down.

You see, we have a respectable reputation,  
stretched to the edges of this newspaper town.

*Catherine Pabalate*

## Madame Kabaret's Wandering Circus

"Remember to greet her as she enters," Mother warned, shrugging the dark velvet dress over Anne's head. "Curtsy at the door and kiss her hand if she extends it. And don't squabble. If you behave poorly in front of Madame, there will be consequences."

"That's unfair," Margarete whined from the corner of the room. She was taking a brush to her curly mane, wincing as she fought against a ferocious knot. "It was all Anne's fault last time. She kept pulling on the tablecloth, and she almost knocked the cottage pie into my lap. I shouldn't be blamed for having perfect manners while *she* was the one who almost ruined everything."

"Anne is young. Madame might have forgiven a mess, but she does not condone arguing." At the sound of her name, Anne reached her chubby hands towards Mother, who lifted her to her chest. Anne clung to Mother's neck, burying her face in Mother's long ebony hair. Mother rested one hand on Anne's back, the other on her pregnant stomach.

"Please, don't be so harsh, Margarete. I know you don't get along well with Anne, but she means no harm. She will learn soon. You were not well-mannered when you were young, either."

"I know," Margarete grumbled, setting her brush down. Mother gave her a smile, but it was hollow and inauthentic. Mother never forgot the mechanics of a smile—she was a refined lady, after all—but she certainly could not remember the intentions of one. Margarete thought it made her seem rather severe.

Margarete sighed once Mother and Anne had left the room. She stared into the mirror, pulling at the skin around her cheekbones, assessing her facial features. Would Madame believe *her* to be a refined lady? Margarete had to admit that she looked more like Father than Mother—her hair was tousled rather than sleek, her face was round and freckled, and she was the tallest and broadest of her sisters. Margarete growled, digging a pouf into a tin of powder. Pattering her face, she covered her freckles and sun-splotched skin and prayed silently that Madame would fall for the facade.

"Margarete!" her brother Asa shouted, rushing through the door frame. "What are you doing in here? Madame is arriving!"

Leaping from her seat, Margarete nearly tumbled down the stairs as she made her way to the foyer. When she dropped to the landing, her ankle rolled in her tight oxford shoes, but she smothered the pain with a nervous grin. Her family, too occupied by the carriage outside the window, didn't seem to notice her misstep.

They stood together in a straight line, with Mother and Father closest to the door, and the children ordered from oldest to youngest. Margarete—the third of five—wormed her way in between Asa and Kathleen. Kathleen was clenching her fists, pressing her nails harshly into her

palms. Margarete, noticing the thin crescent cuts blemishing Kathleen's skin, grabbed her wrist and squeezed tightly. Kathleen understood the warning and unclenched her hands, eyes wide.

The family watched as she approached the door. Madame dressed the same each time she arrived, with her black ringleader's hat and her silk gloves that reached her elbows. She walked along with a steel cane; her hands wrapped around the crow's-beak handle. Her gait was slow, each step poised and deliberate. She paused; her eyes sharp behind her gold-rimmed spectacles. Mother gasped, curtsied curtly, and clasped Madame's hands in hers.

"Madame Kabaret! It is such an honor to have you in our home once more." Mother did this every time—she armed herself with effusive praise, in the hopes that it would please Madame. She was never sure if it did.

"The pleasure is mine, Lady Harring. I'm glad to see you and your family once more. Come, show me the dining hall, and tell me what you've prepared tonight."

"Oh! Of course." Mother ushered Madame into the neighboring room, where eight seats had been set with Mother's favorite poppy-flower chinaware. Madame picked up a spoon and studied it, rubbing her silk gloves along the flawless metal. With a clicking noise from her tongue, she set it back down and followed Mother into the kitchen.

"The main course tonight will be roast cod and potatoes. I hope that is to your liking," Mother said, rocking back on her heels. "Don't worry—everything has been prepared with flawless care."

Madame hummed, causing Mother to wince. "Did any of the children assist you in your cooking?"

"Well, yes—Elise, Margarete, and Kathleen."

"And you are sure they did not contaminate the dinner?"

Mother's eyes bore into ours, fierce and forewarning. Elise, the eldest of the four daughters, spoke up. "No, Madame, we washed our hands very well before dealing with the ingredients."

"Is that so?"

Elise nodded, so Madame probed no further.

• • •

Dinner proceeded as expected: in total silence, interjected only by Madame's questioning. Each family member answered truthfully, as there was no use lying to Madame. She could tell from their shifting eyes when someone was hiding something from her.

"Asa," Madame exclaimed, and Asa jolted, hitting his knee against the table. Mother and Father grimaced. "You are in your sixth year of school, is that correct?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Do you find that your classmates are often sick? It seems that children in their prepubescent years are often falling ill to polio and other deadly ailments."

"No, Madame," Asa stammered. "No, I don't believe that is the case."

“Believe? This is not something to believe; it is something to know. So, tell me, why are you uncertain? Is it because you’re a fool, or is it because you’re a liar?”

Asa gaped and turned to Mother, but she looked away. However, Madame seemed satisfied with the conversation and continued.

“Kathleen, Anne, you two are not yet in school, is that right? Do you spend a lot of time outdoors? I’m sure you enjoy playing in the gardens. Tell me: what is your favorite flower?”

Kathleen, wrought with anxiety, didn’t respond, but Anne, young and enthusiastic, answered, “Peony.”

“Wonderful! What an intelligent young lady. Do you help Mother tend to the flowers each day?”

Anne nodded, glowing with excitement. “Yes, I do! I plant my own too, sometimes.”

“Brilliant,” Madame replied, grinning. Mother leaned forward, bracing herself with the table.

“I know what you’re insinuating, Madame,” she said darkly, and Madame smiled at her, “but Anne is a careful girl. She isn’t like Kirk or William. Don’t get any sinister ideas.”

“Oh, I forgot about Kirk and William! You must be so worried about them. You raised those boys well; I hope you realize. They are perfectly safe in my care. Kirk is a lovely little clown now, and William is a strangely competent lion tamer. I am so grateful to have them in my troupe, so I commend you for your capabilities as a mother.”

The room went silent. Elise wiped a tear from the corner of her eyes. Anne turned to Mother, confused. With his head lowered, Father spoke up. “Give them back.”

Madame Kabaret tittered into her gloved hand. “Oh no, they can’t come back. They have joined my circus, so now they are a part of my community. I couldn’t afford to lose such valuable assets to my troupe. I do hope you understand. If it eases your mind, they quite enjoy it with us. William is a shy child, but Kirk has made friends with all of the other clown boys. Both of them are content. When the rest of you come to the circus, you’ll see we are a family, an united organism.”

“They were only seven!” Mother cried. Startled by the outburst, Kathleen grabbed Margarete’s hand under the table. “They were innocent children! They were stubborn and reckless, yes, but only in the way young boys should be. And you *knew* they were too young. They should be here, at the dinner table with their family, rather than wearing clown shoes and taming lions!”

“Shouting won’t change their circumstances,” Madame retorted, a sharp edge carving her voice, “and it won’t change Anne’s, either. I’ve decided now that I will bring her along with me to the circus this year. I think she would make a pleasant little clown, or perhaps she can groom the poodles. Regardless, it is time for her to join us in our performance.”

“No,” Mother growled. “Stay away from her.”

“What do you suggest, then? My troupe of wanderers needs a new member.”

Mother paused, then turned to each of her children—Elise, Asa, Margarete, Kathleen, and, finally, little Anne. “Fine. Take me. I’ll join in their place.”



Madame hummed in consideration. “Are you sure? You’re a healthy and promising woman—the circus may not be meant for you.”

“Mona, please,” Father whispered, placing a hand on Mother’s stomach. Mother held his shoulder gently as she planted a kiss on his cheek.

“I’m sure,” Mother replied, standing from her seat at the table. She grabbed Madame Kabaret’s hands, just as she had in the foyer. “Take me, Madame. I am ready to follow you.”

As she followed Madame to the carriage, the children wailed, clinging to her skirt. Anne, still unaware, held out her hands for Mother, her face dropping when Mother wouldn’t pick her up anymore. Father stood in the doorway silently, his brow furrowed and strained. Tears streaming down her face, Mother tried once more to smile, but she still couldn’t perfect it. “Keep well, my loves. When you join Madame in the future, please find me, so I may see you again.”

• • •

A gravestone can be found in the gardens of the Haring residence, neat and pristine in comparison to two moss-covered graves with which it lies. The dirt surrounding the grave was upheaved frequently by six pairs of feet, but the grave itself remained untouched. In the springtime, peony petals sprinkled the base.

The gravestone read: *Mona Haring. 1857-1894. Loving wife of Edgar Haring, caring mother of seven. Died in childbirth. May she find solace in her eternal wander.*

*Christian Barragan*

## **Within Frame**

Given my lifelong fascination with the concept of reaction, it's no wonder I eventually gravitated toward film. I wasn't allowed to watch many films growing up, so this interest developed much later. Still, I spent much of my early years trying to evoke emotional reactions from the people around me. I wasn't successful.

Given how often my parents beat me, I was given many opportunities to practice. The process became predictable. Each time they took their frustrations out on me, I always looked for signs of the emotions I had learned. *Sympathy. Regret.* I knew what the words meant, but I never saw them in the eyes of my parents. Or the other family members I told in secret. It never surprised me because it's all I ever knew, but it still felt wrong. These people were supposed to protect me. The reactions from my peers whenever I arrived at school covered in bruises weren't the ones I wanted. *Disgust.* I knew that word, too.

I looked for a reaction when my parents kicked me out of the house after graduation. I tried to picture the image of myself leaving the doorstep for the last time as they might have seen me, a defeated child crying into a dark unforgiving silence. Perhaps it was the natural state of the world not to react to me. I wanted to change that, if only once.

I took my interest in images with me when I briefly studied film at my hometown's local community college. It was there that I met the Squid Hat group. You'll understand why I can't use the real name of the group or its members. At its most basic function, the group was a club of filmmakers meant to support each other and create loosely collaborated projects. I say "loosely" because, in reality, most of the members cared more about their individual pursuits than anyone else. Most creatives are like that, it seems.

Even after dropping out of school at the end of my second semester, I remained with the group for another two years. During this time, I learned practically nothing about any of its members. Most of them attributed their tight-lipped nature to Citra. She was a former journalist they were afraid would reveal their intimate details if she ever decided to regress to her old profession. Despite this, she never gossiped and wore her reactions on her sleeve. It was never a challenge to see her intentions. She was also the only member Darnell paid special attention to.

Darnell was the only member I knew on a somewhat personal basis. He was a dependable but reserved member of the group who happened to be by far the most frustrating. During the screenings of our short films, it was almost impossible to tell what he thought of our work, as he hardly gave any feedback other than minor suggestions. Though young, his tired face attested to a trying life. It was in the microscopic intricacies of his expressions and his previous background in theater that I knew he was capable of every conceivable emotion. Yet he chose not to use them.

Despite his somewhat distant approach to the narcissistic group, he was fiercely loyal to Squid Hat. If not for him the group likely would have disintegrated long before I joined. He was

hardly ever thanked for his efforts, but he made most of the planning and arranged several of our group exercises. Otherwise, the motley collection would have been little more than a group chat with a shared interest. He was especially loyal to Citra, who he worked with most often, given her difficulty grasping many of the concepts.

Our collaborative projects were mostly small-scale, and we had an unspoken rule that we weren't supposed to reveal who came up with each idea, but it was usually easy to tell who did. This time, I couldn't tell. Once the idea was announced, Darnell wrote a one-word emotional reaction on a strip of paper, one per member, and placed it into a hat. Each of us picked out a word without revealing it to the others. The idea was to shoot a simple short film embodying the reaction as best we could. I knew the game had been rigged since I received the most abstract, hardest reaction to complete.

I gave my best effort to conceal my frustration. A cesspool of emotions threatened to explode in my face that same instant, but it would have been unthinkable to break right then. Fine, I thought. I'll give them a reaction. Using myself was out of the question. This wasn't high school. I needed real actors. Or perhaps just one. I labored over my idea for days. Most of our group members went separate ways and the deadline neared but eventually I recognized my opportunity. Given my information, there was only one way to make this film.

I knew Darnell was the only other member of the group who had remained in the general vicinity. I invited him to witness the completion of my own shot, however brief it was supposed to be. I sent him the location of the abandoned theater where I had set up, the same theater where we had our first meetings, and informed him I wanted his feedback before the deadline.

I brought him through the mess of gear I had staged through the piles of concrete and fence that had been strewn about. He kept himself a few steps in front of me, deducing the basic path of where I was taking him. I wanted so badly to see his expressions, but I knew I'd get my chance.

I could tell he knew something was wrong. He passed by the stains on the floor he knew couldn't have been there for long. The place was a mess, as always, but it was worse than usual.

He passed a boom mic. Then a camera. Then another. A larger collection of stains on the ground. A lamp knocked over with a broken bulb. His pace quickened.

He found a camera on the table I had set nearby and immediately recognized it as Citra's. He only turned to tell me that we weren't supposed to directly involve other people from the group. I said nothing.

Darnell turned toward a pocket in the alley where he saw the final setup of the film. Disgusted, he asked me how I was able to get the prop to look so much like her. I stood with him in silence, knowing he was asking the wrong question. Darnell then asked me what word I had received from the hat. He said he couldn't tell from my setup and that wasn't a good sign.

I waited until he eventually faced me in a final admission and the remaining denial drained out of his face. As he turned back toward the grisly scene, I imagined myself the way he must have imagined me up to that point. How they'd all imagined me. A defeated girl, crying into the darkness. This time my cry would be heard.

Right then he felt the pointed nub press against the soft tissue of his back. At what I can only assume was the perfect moment, he noticed the camera perched above him. I wanted so much to see how the shot would come out, knowing it wouldn't be quite the same as the real thing. That's when I told him my word.

*Betrayal.*

*Dominik Slusarczyk*

## **Hiking**

“We’ll never make the jump,” Sally says. She is tall, blonde, beautiful. Her ponytail flicks back and forth like a horse’s tail. Her backpack is attached so tightly that I can see the straps digging into her shoulders. “We should go back.”

“The guidebook says this is the right way,” I say. My messy moustache tickles my top lip as I speak. I reach up and tighten the straps of my backpack a little. “It’s not far. It’s only a little jump.”

Sally walks forwards and peers over the drop. The colour drains from her face. I approach the drop and stand by her side. I roll my eyes at her. It is only 20 feet to the ground. Sure, the rocks look sharp, but we will just not fall down there. The gap is only four or five feet wide so we can jump it easily.

“Haven’t you seen that Parkour?” I ask. “People do jumps like this on the top of skyscrapers. We’re basically in a field. It’ll be easy.”

“I don’t know, Gary. If we miss the jump, we’ll fall and break our legs. Who knows how long it’ll take them to get paramedics all the way up here.”

“I’ll go first,” I say. I take a couple of steps backwards then I take a deep breath and jog towards the gap.

• • •

“It must be broken,” Sally shouts from the top of the canyon. Her face looks small and childlike from where I am. “Don’t try to move. I’ll go and get help.”

Sally’s face disappears from view. I return my attention to my body. My left leg is twisted uncomfortably under my body. I desperately want to free it, but I am worried that if I do I will do it more damage. That leg took most of the impact. I heard a number of snaps. It aches something horrid.

The first wolf shows up as the sun is setting. He pauses at the edge of the forest a couple of hundred yards away. He sits on his haunches and stares at me for over a minute before he decides to approach. He walks forward until he is only fifty yards away then he sits on his haunches again. He just sits there; he doesn’t attack or growl or anything. An hour later another wolf appears and sits beside the first wolf. By the time the sun has started to set there are four or five wolves. They just sit there and stare at me. I don’t know what they’re waiting for, but they will surely attack soon.

• • •

I hear the helicopter before I see it: a low humming fills the air. The humming gets louder and louder until, suddenly, a bright spotlight appears on the ground nearby. The bright light lands on the line of wolves and illuminates them strongly. The wolves immediately stand up and wander back into the forest.

The humming is a roar in the air above me now. I stare upwards and the huge black form of the helicopter enters my vision. The search light attached underneath the helicopter blinds me. I raise my hand to shield my eyes from the glare.

I hear something drop from the helicopter and impact with the ground. I turn my head and see the end of a soft, black, rope. I crane my head slightly more upwards and see the black shadow of a person descending the rope. My eyes follow the person all the way to the ground.

“Mr. Phillips, is it?” The man shouts over the roar of the helicopter. I nod and raise the hand that isn’t shielding my eyes to give him a thumbs up.

The man attaches a red harness to me and then he attaches the harness to the rope. When he is happy that I am secure he tugs on the rope twice. The rope starts to drag me upwards. As soon as my left leg moves there is shooting pain which is so intense, I open my mouth and scream.

• • •

“The guidebook says this is the way,” I say, though I am unsure of it myself. The path, if it can even be called a path, is broken, thin, in distinct. It is nothing more than a whisper of flat ground on the edge of the mountain peak that rises high above us. I haven’t inspected it yet but I am sure there is a vast drop to the right of the path.

“Look,” I say as I hold out the map for Sally to see. She stares over my shoulder at the map.

“We came up here,” I say, pointing at the right place on the map. “Then we went over this bit here, up that bit there, and now we’re here. The little blue line we’re following goes right up the mountain.”

“Remember Cornwall,” Sally says. “It’s only a little jump, you said. It’ll be easy, you said. It’s what the guidebook says, you said.”

“The walks are supposed to be challenging; that’s half the fun. Putting yourself in a bit of danger is exciting.”

“Go and look at the drop.”

I lower the map, approach the path, and peer over the edge to its right. The drop is huge - hundreds of feet. The path is so thin, so spindly, that we wouldn’t even be able to fit both our feet on it, side by side. One wrong step and we would surely die; there would be no helicopters, no hospitals. I turn and walk back to Sally.

“The guidebook’s stupid,” I say. “There’s no way I’m climbing that mountain.”

“Some people enjoy putting their life in danger. They like sky diving and squirrel suits and all that rubbish. They get some kind of sick rush out of almost dying. A lot of them die doing their strange stunts.”

“I just wanted to stretch my legs. I never wanted danger. I never wanted to risk my life. I just wanted a pleasant little hobby.”

“We can do a different hobby. We can start a book club or something.”

“That sounds like a lovely idea.”

We start walking back down the mountain side by side. I take Sally’s hand and she squeezes my hand gently.

“What book do you want to read?” I ask.

“Anything except that damn guidebook.”

“We could start a cooking club. Everyone can cook their favourite meal.”

“We could start a knitting club. I’ve always wanted to make you a jumper.”

“I would like that very much. I would wear it every day.”

We get to the car park at the bottom of the mountain. The sun is still high in the sky. Our walk was supposed to take 4 hours, but we were only gone for half an hour. Sometimes you know when to stop. Sometimes you don’t know when to stop and someone has to stop you. We are all too embarrassed to admit it, but we desperately need other people.

• • •

“I liked the Henry character,” Mrs. Humster says. She is wearing the fluffy pink cardigan Sally knitted for her. She has short curly black hair and thick circular glasses. “He could’ve killed the bad wizard all on his own: he has the most powerful wand.”

“Yes, but Angela has the best cloak,” Mr. Rodgers says. “Nothing can hurt her when she’s wearing her cloak. If you’re going to fight an evil wizard, you need Angela by your side.”

“They make a good team,” Sally says. She is sat directly on my left. I look at her and smile. She returns my smile. Her eyes are wide and happy.

“I can’t wait to read the next one,” I say. “The internet says it’s out in a couple of months.”

That night I think about the book as I lie in bed. I think about good wizards and bad wizards, good people, and bad people, and how they both need each other, or they would never get to go on adventures worthy of immortalising in book form.

*Edward Burke*

## **Cooked Rice or Well-fed Maggots?**

Some commodities markets had been behaving peculiarly that summer. This did not strike me with much force until I finally decided to get that pesky boil lanced, after it had been bothering me for over a month. I couldn't make arrangements for the procedure until after I'd traded my jujitsu instruction membership to a third party for a nominal gain, I lost over fifty dollars on that one: I'd expected when I signed up to recover the membership fee even after inflation, but inflation had revved up higher quicker than I'd expected. By delaying the procedure, I'd probably risked developing gangrene in my left wrist, but then with the shirts I wear a size too large the sleeves are a little long anyway, and besides, I'm right-handed.

The day he performed the lancing, Luce recalled for my benefit and edification (not really: Luce is something of a show-off, but he is one skilled lancer, better at that than his tattooing practice, so I never quibble) that common maggots can help keep a serious wound from turning gangrenous, at least in the short term. He'd read an account in some World War I memoir. Since he himself was taking care of the painful boil, I went ahead and decided to submit the deep gash in my left leg to the hungry fly larvae for a couple of days. Sure enough, another two days and the lanced boil was well on the way to healing painlessly, and Luce removed the maggots one by one with tweezers, then washed and cleanly dressed the gash in my leg. (Later in the week, my wrist did grow pretty stiff, but at least gangrene never set in, much to my surprise and relief.) He charged only \$110 (USD) for the lancing—a fair price, still cheaper than any doctor. We'd both insisted on boiled utensils, no charge. Therapy with the “sterile” maggots ran another \$90, plus I got to collect all of them in an old plastic medicine canister: that very afternoon, I pulled them out one by one with my own set of tweezers and fried each one of them on the end of a cigarette—no need for them to enjoy their profit for too long, thought I. They squirmed mightily, betrayed, but I don't like having my DNA in circulation. When I'd told him about my intentions for the maggots, Luce praised my aesthetic sensibilities.

Famished after this ordeal, I strolled to my favorite Chinese restaurant with a slight limp for some hot pepper fried steak, with mushrooms. My left leg throbbed below the knee; I'd neglected to count on pain meds but figured I could tough it out. The fried rice and mushrooms melted effortlessly in my mouth: this was the best thing to take my mind off my most recent trip out-of-town.

Early the following week, a shipment of rice arrived from Noirlens that I'd been expecting, although it was not quite as large as the contract order, or so I thought, the order seemed somehow light. I checked the weight on the consignment sheet, but it still seemed a little light when I lifted the box: but I was too tired that day to investigate any further. I kept it in the system anyway, bound for Memphis, after which it was supposed to be picked up by some Indiana trucker bound for Chicago, or maybe it was Battle Creek, Michigan, I forget now. (I



never track shipments north of Memphis anyway, the same for Nashville and Knoxville, except sometimes for loads bound for Lexington and Louisville.)

The next week, Candy called from Noirlens; she had an extra hundred pounds of shrimp to move, fast. I had no open fulfillment orders pending and was about to hang up, when out of the blue I wondered about who sourced the shrimp for my Chinese restaurant. I put her on hold and made a quick call to check, and good thing, too! I told Candy they could take it, and she was so happy she said she'd drive up and deliver it herself. I told her to pick me up at the end of the day the next day after work for the delivery, and I'd take her to the restaurant and treat her to supper.

She got in ahead of rush hour: the shrimp were floating in ten sealed bags, still frozen in the icy water of the cooler. She drove us to the restaurant, and we off-loaded the shrimp for cash, then went around to park in front. Inside, we both ordered something with shrimp and talked over old times as we waited for supper. When our plates arrived, we both dove right in—and instantly, we both paused: something about the shrimp...we eyed each other over our plates, continued chewing, and both swallowed our first mouthfuls. The aftertaste was even worse, a thick cloying slime that could actually choke you unless you immediately flossed. Most fortunately, Candy kept a spool in her purse. After pulling off quick a length for me and one for her, I intercepted our waiter to ask about our order. He disappeared and returned ten minutes later with two fresh plates, taking the first two away.

As a side venture, this restaurant had begun dabbling in Spanish cuisine (dishes more elaborate than tapas), and the cook had found out the hard way about the tarragon: she was mortified to learn she'd been using entire kilos of it each week. Stock replenishment came to Candy's mind and mine simultaneously, so we thought it safe to go ahead and marry the following weekend in Metairie.

*Frank Freeman*

## **Quoth the Raven**

It was raining outside, I was bored.  
My father was an intern.  
He was too busy to play with me.  
Twenty-four hours on, twelve hours off.

My father was an intern.  
He told me to go read a book.  
Twenty-four hours on, twelve hours off.  
Rain trickled down the window panes.

He told me to go read a book.  
The one I picked was heavy and blue.  
Rain trickled down the window panes.  
The pages were like onion skin.

The one I picked was heavy and blue  
While I pondered weak and weary...  
The pages were like onion skin.  
They whispered between my fingers.

While I pondered weak and weary...  
Quoth the Raven, nevermore...  
They whispered between my fingers.  
How could something so beautiful be so sad?

Quoth the Raven, nevermore...  
It was raining, I was bored.  
How could something so beautiful be so sad?  
He was too busy to play with me.

*Garvin Livingston*

## **Romantica**

Many guys in my high school found themselves pulled into the gravitational field of Diora Melvin and probably never managed to escape their orbit around her even today, eighteen years after graduation. I have not stayed in touch with too many of my friends from those days and I never went to any of our reunions. But I am sure that there are guys from my class who still get together sometimes and ask about the prettiest and most popular girls from back then. Diora's name would most certainly come up.

She was warm and friendly to everyone but showed a certain shyness that made her approachable. It was her quiet demeanor that created just enough mystery to keep the guys going around and around. I was not one of those guys which is why I cannot explain why one weekend after probably close to twenty years of never even thinking about her, she got stuck in my head.

I wish I knew what might have ignited this compulsion. I was not reminiscing about high school. No one had mentioned her name to me. She just popped into my consciousness and after that, I could not get her out.

I did not know where she might have been living. She probably left Buffalo as most of us had. I did not know if she was married or had kids and rather than trying to see what I could find out about her, instead, I started to make plans for us. I thought about what a nice story it would be to tell my parents and my sister that I had reconnected with one of the most popular girls from high school; one of the girls that every guy had wanted to date. I thought about the reaction I would get from Dan and Jeff, the only two friends from high school with whom I was still in regular contact. I looked forward to introducing her to my co-workers and neighbors. I was sure that she would enjoy Livermore, California which is where I had been living for the past ten years.

I never really knew much about her. I could not remember if she was involved in any activities: sports, music, art, student government? I do not think I ever knew if she had any brothers or sisters, and I cannot remember who her close friends might have been. I did not even know what kind of student she was. I just remembered her being very pretty and pleasant. I can still see her sitting in the cafeteria; her delicate nose, dark eyes the same color as the streaks that nature had placed in a random pattern throughout her blonde, shoulder-length hair. And then there was that smile. When it was on, it was warm and genuine. When it turned off, I sensed almost a lonely helplessness which was probably what attracted those boys in search of a girl to rescue. My first two years of high school I was with Stephanie and then after an amicable break-up, I dated Sasha all the way until graduation. Both of these girls had a firm hold on my heart which might be why I barely noticed Diora or any of the other popular girls. I worried enough about my sudden interest in Diora to consider calling Dr. Bern, the therapist I had seen for about six months after Christine broke off our engagement. I had learned enough from Natalie Bern during our weekly sessions to practically self-treat which is what she probably

saw was our ultimate goal. So, I had conversations without her, and I think she would have been proud of my analytical thinking.

NB: (Dr. Natalie Bern): So, what brings you here Anthony?

A (me): I've found myself thinking about a woman I knew in high school.

NB: Someone with whom you had a connection?

A: No. Not at all. I probably knew her well enough in high school where we might have smiled and said hi to each other but that was the extent of my interaction with her.

Dr. Bern would have most likely paused at this point hoping that the silence would get me to continue.

A. This is why it's very weird. I have no idea what might have triggered this. I want to call it an obsession. Whenever I'm thinking about anything related to my future, Diora is in the picture.

NB. Diora is the girl from high school?

A: Yes. I have no anxiety whatsoever about this. I'm not bothered that I'm thinking about Diora all the time. It's just matter of fact. I talk to myself as if it is inevitable that Diora will come into my life and that we are going to be together. When I'm eating a meal, I wonder if Diora likes whatever it is I'm eating. When I ride my bicycle, I wonder if she likes cycling. I'm planning a ski trip now with some friends for February and I'm seeing her being with us on that trip.

NB. Does that sound irrational to you?

A: One hundred percent. But I don't feel like I'm being irrational. It's not me creating a fantasy. It just feels like I'm somehow aware that this very strange turn of events in my life is going to happen. It feels like I've just been given notification in advance. I guess so that I can prepare.

NB: Had Diora's name come up in some conversation before you started getting what you seem to describe as a premonition?

A: Nothing. I have no idea how she popped into my head. I never had a crush on her when we were in high school. She was just a pretty girl in the background. Everyone knew her. She was pretty and popular, but I never had any interest in her. I don't even think any of my friends really even knew her.

NB: And you're convinced that she is going to somehow pop into your life now. Have you tried to find out anything about her? Is she married? Does she have kids?

A: Yes, she's married and yes, she has two little kids. A boy and a girl. They're probably about 7 and 9 or something like that. I went weeks without having any interest in finding out anything about her. Then as time went on, I thought it was ridiculous that I knew absolutely nothing about her. So, I found her on Facebook. She has not aged well. And she is a lot heavier. If I saw this woman today, I would feel no attraction. But I didn't feel disappointment. My thinking is that all of this is irrelevant. She's married today; has kids. She's heavy and very plain looking. It doesn't matter. I don't have a choice. She's somehow coming into my life, and we are going to be together. That's all there is to it. I'm not bothered by it. I'm not excited about it. Do you have an explanation for this?

NB: There are some things Anthony, that go beyond psychology. Cosmologists, theoretical physicists, philosophers, clerics, spiritual mystics might all have explanations. Psychologists dabble in the question of whether or not the mind can someone ascertain what will happen in the future. So, no, I would not worry about it. As long as you know that this feeling of foreshadowing is not conventional, I would say just let it unfold and if by any chance you do end up with Diora, consider yourself fortunate to have participated in one of the mysteries of life.

So, in this imaginary conversation with Dr. Bern, she did nothing to try and convince me that maybe I was delusional or maybe this was related to me still not being over Christine. Christine broke off our engagement two years ago, I was devastated. Natalie helped me get through the pain. Christine married someone else, and I have no contact with her. I don't think about her much. I'm still a little sad but I have accepted what happened and I, no doubt, grew from the experience despite how difficult it was. I'm more secure today and better equipped to handle whatever life might bring me in the future.

Everything happened with Diora through a series of events that some people might call coincidences, but I refer to that experience as simply things unfolding as expected. I got a phone call from Tom Stafford who had heard that I had experience trading precious metals. I knew Tom in high school and had seen him a few times or heard some things about him through mutual friends. He had a possible job offer for me which was not really right for me, so I declined. Then he said, "Do you remember Diora Melvin?"

"Yes. Sure." I had prepared for this for a long time, and it was finally here like a major exam or a sporting event or business presentation. It was actually happening just as I knew it would.

"She was good friends with Claire Thomas. Do you remember her?"

"No."

“Well, Claire knows you and she knows that you were engaged. And she knows that you are no longer engaged.” I waited wondering if the path was opening. Or was this going to be a false alarm, a dead end. “She asked me if I ever talk to you. I told her that coincidentally I was going to call you about a job offer. She told me to ask you if you remember Diora.”

“Why?”

“Diora was asking about you. She went through a divorce not too long ago. Diora was hot, man. I would explore this one if I were you. Are you involved with anyone?”

Tom gave me Diora’s number. We talked. I learned that she was living near Sacramento. We got together and then everything took off from there.

So, that was the story I told myself. Thank God I never told anyone else. All of it is true up until the point where I get a phone call from Tom Stafford. I never knew anyone named Tom Stafford or Claire Thomas. I made both of them up. And I never had any kind of contact with Diora. But everything before that is true. I did start obsessing over her for no explainable reason. It was never a desire. It was just a strong premonition that she was going to come into my life. I always knew that it was irrational but that did not make it any less real. The notion of making contact with Diora through fictitious individuals was a fantasy and I knew that. I realized that it was simply an escape. There was a void at that moment of my life, and it led to loneliness. Once I stopped thinking about Diora and let go of the belief that we were going to be together, I knew that I had to go see Dr. Bern for real rather than have a fictional dialogue with her. She was more clinical than I remembered, more matter of fact, no non-sense.

“What brings you here Anthony?” she asked.

“I really think that I’m over Christine. I’ve felt that way for a while. My desire for her waned over time and I accept the fact that she is married now.” Dr. Bern looked at me with a “let’s get on with it” look. I wanted to feel safer, but I sensed that she wasn’t going to indulge me in the way that the Natalie Bern in my imaginary conversation had done. “But...but...I’ve just been having this very strong hunch that somehow I’m going to hear from her, and she is coming back into my life.”

*Georgie Popovitch*

## **What Happened to Lucas**

### PART ONE:

Lucas has been missing for a week now. The police have been good; they have been giving me daily updates, which so far, amount to nothing. Tana, Lucas's girlfriend, is morose, in a blank stupor that neither me, nor her family can bring her out of. I have gone to visit her for tea, keeping her updated on what the police have to say, on where the investigation is heading, which, like I said, is nowhere. Sometimes she cries, but most often she just stares at her cup, the palm of her hand placed over the top, her fingers splayed tightly on the sides and grasping tightly, as though, like her life, it could slip and shatter into a million pieces at any moment, the hot liquid splattering in all directions on the floor. Her other hand covers the growing bump inside her belly, protecting it. They will be parents soon, her and Lucas, and I imagine, in her grief-stricken worry, she is wondering if she can manage on her own. If he doesn't come back.

### PART TWO:

It's almost two weeks now and I've spent a lot of time thinking about Lucas and the messed-up life we shared, wondering if things might have turned out differently if I had stayed away from Tom, Lucas's father. I knew Tom had a messy upbringing, he was honest with me, and I loved him for that. We talked and we cried, and I thought that was the end of it, it was packed and put away, and we would move forward. And be happy. I was wrong.

The first time Tom hit me; I fought back. It was pointless, but the surprise at being hit fueled so much shock and rage that I hit back, thinking I might be a match. I wasn't, so the second time he did it I gathered what I could and ran.

The second time happened on a quiet stretch of country road a few miles from our acreage, home to a dilapidated out-of-use barn, a root cellar dug deep into the cold ground, and an old farmhouse that used to be small but had been added to by his grandfather, and then his father, and then extended again by him before we married. Comprised of its small, original brick-and-mortar core and later, several wood-framed protrusions, it took on the character of a large, rambling spider, unsure of which way it was about to move. To look at, the house was very much like Tom: unpredictable.

We were arriving from town on an evening that ended badly, arguing about something or other. He wanted to stay, I think to nurture a flirtation some girl was having with him, but I pressured him into coming home. We had Lucas with us that night and he was young, about eighteen months old, and he was getting tired and cranky. I used it as an excuse to get Tom out of there, but honestly, it was probably because I was afraid of where the flirtation might lead. Tom was quiet on that ride home, and as we approached our dark gravelled stretch, about three miles away from the yard, he reached across Lucas's infant carrier, tethered into the centre of the bench seat, and smashed his fist into my face. I had learned from the first time; I was no match.

He had been drinking, so I had been driving, and I used it to my advantage - I slammed on the brakes, the truck skidding on the washboard gravel until it came to a stop in the centre of the empty road. I jumped out, used all of my strength to yank his intoxicated, unsteady body out of the cab, and ran back to the driver's side to get away, before he composed himself enough to jump back in and finish what he started.

I sped toward our yard, the truck bouncing dangerously from side to side on the gravel as it fought to stay on the rippled washboard, while Lucas's shaken body erupted in undulating screams. It was a risk I was willing to take to avoid the consequence of Tom catching up, which, looking back, would have been impossible, but I wasn't thinking straight at that point.

In those addled minutes it took me to drive to the house, I calmed myself down enough to develop a plan and used a precious few more to take what I thought I might need. Bottles, diapers, and a few changes of clothes for Lucas. A little bit of cash I had been saving for a new pair of shoes, and a low-limit credit card stashed in Tom's sock drawer, our "emergency" card, that had never been used. I couldn't remember the last time we went somewhere, where I might have stored our large suitcase, the barn maybe? So, I grabbed what was closest, a large green garbage bag kept under the kitchen sink and threw everything into it. I loaded Lucas and the bag into the cab and drove a hundred miles away, to the nearest city and the cheapest motel I could find. The plan back then was to never return, to start fresh, and safe, and never be hit again.

That was the second time. The time I realized I was trapped. No skills, no money, no family—and so, the third, fourth, and following times were not as dramatic. Eventually, I gave in. I knew when I was beaten and focused on doing everything I could to keep the peace.

What, exactly was my version of peace? Protecting Lucas, of course. When Tom came home quiet and sullen, I would order Lucas to his room for an early bedtime, and when Tom was in an explosive mood I would send Lucas to the store, or to a friend, or to any place but home. My beautiful little boy would not pay for my mistakes, my weakness. I don't know how much he really saw or took in during his early years, but kids are perceptive, and by the time he was in grade school, he seemed to know when it was safe around his father, and when to avoid him. I always did everything in my power to make sure I took the brunt of the beatings, but sometimes I was gone, and Lucas had to fend for himself.

### PART THREE:

The police have come back several times, always with the same questions, "What time did Lucas stop by that day? Did he say where he was going next?" And finally, "You realize, right? What we are asking you? What we are saying? At this point in our investigation, you were the last person to see him before he disappeared."

And now, the police are here again, but this time, there are two cars; both with lights flashing blue and red and blue again, warning there is something drastic to come. My heart sinks and my body leans to the right, an arm outstretched toward the hall console in case I need to brace my fall. Do they know where Lucas is? My mind races and a scene comes back to me: a



one-year-old, wailing in his car seat as I fight to control a truck that could go into the ditch at any moment. I see him at five years old, cowering in the corner of his small bedroom as his father, fist curled and ready to strike, stands over him. So many scenes pass before me of Lucas and the violence he faced. I don't know how much he's told Tana, or how much I should tell her.

I have visited her often since she reported him missing. Each time she reaches forward to pick up her teacup, I watched her shirtsleeve slide up to reveal the inside of her delicate wrist, the bruise turning from a deep purple to a harsh green, and then a fading yellow. Fresh two weeks ago, the bruise slowly disappears with time. I know why she holds her belly the way she does, as though she's trying to shield the life inside her from what is sure to come on the outside. What I have done is for her, too.

I can see them coming to the door, search warrant in hand. They will find him, stiff and cold in our root cellar, where I have chained him, and it will be too late. Too late for Lucas, my beautiful little boy, but not too late for my grandchild.

*Jangar Tokpa*

## **Seashells as Sandbags**

It's inside the hum of the seashells  
where I am safe.

I dance with the ocean,  
the tide greets me as a friend,  
the swash soothes my aching feet.  
I think I am still dancing.  
I can't feel anything.  
Just hear the soft hum,  
feel the subtle buzz.

In death I display ecstasy.  
Play the discography of my life.  
Listen for the hums.  
Perhaps this is my rebirth.  
That would give reason for  
celebration, song, and dance.

As I'm still dancing

the ocean goes still.

It's like she's watching me.  
Waiting for me to dance into her mouth.  
She wants me to drown.  
I want to drown.  
Does porcelain sink?

I will take my seashells with me.  
They will weigh me down,  
and I will listen to the hum.

*Jeffrey Hantover*

## **The Dog That Barked**

The police detective thanked him for his help. His teenage son thought it was cool that his father broke the case. Called him “Sherlock,” which was quite a change from the boy’s usual sullen silence. The neighbor next door in 3F claimed he had taken his dog out at midnight and hadn’t returned till almost one. When he came back, he found his wife dead on the kitchen floor, stabbed multiple times in the chest and neck. Why the police wanted to know had he gone out so late at night? The dog was whining, scratching the front door. He thought the dog might be sick, better he throw up on the sidewalk than in the apartment.

When the police asked if he had heard anything unusual that night, he said that the neighbor’s dog had barked nonstop for five minutes plus starting at 12:15. He was sure of the time because he had been in the second bedroom that was his study talking to a friend and looked at his phone when he was finished. The police checked his phone to confirm the time. The neighbor had lied. He hadn’t left his apartment. The dog had been a vocal witness to the murder of its owner.

His wife seemed troubled by his newfound celebrity among the other tenants and friends. She was unusually quiet, and whenever the topic came up in the week following the murder, she went into the kitchen to clean up even before their guests left. The idea of a murder next store, a bloodied body lying on the kitchen floor, their friendly, middle-aged neighbor brutally stabbing his wife of 27 years with a carving knife was, he was certain, especially disturbing to her. He tried to comfort her, a touch on the shoulder, a hand on her cheek, but she pulled away. At night, she clutched a spare pillow tight to her chest and turned his back to him. He didn’t say anything, believing time would erase the images that were haunting her.

Ten days after the murder, he and his wife sat in silence at the dinner table. She was about to say something, then stopped. One then another tear rolled down her cheeks. She made no effort to wipe away the tears.

“Who were you Face Timing so late? “

“When? “

“The night of the murder.”

“A friend. Just an old friend from high school. You’ve never met her?”

“Just a friend whose face you wanted to see at midnight? How long?”

“Since the 25<sup>th</sup> reunion last year.”

“Eight months.” He didn’t say anything. “How often? Once a week? Twice a week?” He said nothing. “Every night? God, every night.”

In the morning he stood in the hall waiting for the elevator. The workmen had come early to 3F. He heard them ripping up the kitchen floor. They would spackle and paint the entire apartment. The walls would be smooth and white. The real estate agent wouldn’t mention the murder. The apartment would look brand new. All would be as it was before.

*Marisa Gedgaudas*

**In the Summer of Tending Someone Else's Garden**

I choose to ignore the metaphors  
As I plunge my hands into sweet soil  
paying the debt  
to watch foreign flowers bloom  
Here it is ripe and everything is temporary  
Like the season, like the breath  
of warm strawberries  
plucked straight from the stem  
I press tender petals between my palms,  
call you out to the yard  
Wishing to grasp the warm  
fingers of afternoon  
To preserve the memory of all things  
fleeting and soft

*Michael G. O'Connell*

**4:20 AM**

The night was cool  
when I walked up the steps to your room.  
It took me years to do it,  
but I finally got the nerve to hold your hand.  
It was something that I had to do.  
Having only recently gotten comfortable  
with telling you that I loved you.  
Up until a few months ago,  
it was unspoken, but I always knew.  
You did, too.  
I could see it in your blue eyes—  
blue like the sky and every bit as deep as the ocean.

As I took your hand in the darkness,  
I could feel your heart beating with mine.  
Slow and steady.  
Time seemed to stop and  
part of me—the selfish part—  
wanted to hold on to that moment forever.  
Hold on and  
never let go.

Your hand, there in the dark,  
was so soft and delicate  
but too warm for December.  
No words were necessary  
as there was nothing and everything left to say.  
I had to close my eyes and join you in that darkness  
and let memories of the times we shared  
together flood over me.  
I wondered why this moment  
had taken so long to arrive.

Was it only yesterday that I picked you up  
and carried you through the door?  
And put you in bed?

Or was it a week ago?  
Time slips in times like these.  
An uneasy peace settles in  
before Night covers us in darkness  
and play its tricks.

So I held onto your hand, this one last time.  
I had to. I needed your strength,  
and I knew you could hold this reality together.  
You were always the strong and sensible one,  
the magical one, who could do anything  
by sheer will alone.

Eyes closed, I embraced the darkness.  
I clung to you and let the minutes to slip away.  
And there in my hand I held your beating heart.  
It should have filled me with anticipation and dread.  
Instead, it suffused me with the courage to walk away,  
and the peace to know it was time  
to leave you there with your true love,  
this one last time.

*N.A. Kimber*

## **Of Those Who Came Before**

Of those who came before, where are they now?  
In dying gardens, memory and stone?  
Or lost to dusk and wind's exhausted moan?  
Since sad mortality has filled his vow  
All men are cursed to hold his blackened bough  
And drink from the lost and now unknown.  
O, must we dim like Arthur's golden throne?  
Is faded life the best our death allows?

Or shall we glow and live through soft twilight?  
The branch late bare can sprout fresh buds once more  
And larks may sing with gentle rising day.  
Are those before us lost to raging night?  
Or do they live with Memory's encore?  
Alive in hearts, with flowers where they lay.

*Rosalind Weir*

## **A Lost Soul Wanders Amid the Trees**

When I was young, I got lost in the woods.  
I broke from the home I loved dear,  
And wandered away into the autumn groves—  
Bright and red with the decadence of sunlight,  
And knowledge of what it would take from me.

I remember not what I saw out there  
In the place where humans will never rule.  
The cold etched itself upon my bones,  
And I hold the scars of its frozen embrace.  
But those fleeting memories mark me not.

I returned with frost hung in my hair,  
the broken remnants of a lost soul.  
I felt the warm embrace of my mother,  
But could offer nothing human in return.  
For that part of me lay in a crypt of leaves.

I brushed ice from my body that night,  
And watched my spirit melt in my hand.  
It belonged to me but was a different me.  
Oh, how I wish I could piece her together,  
And hear songs of the past she might sing.

I do not feel like myself anymore,  
My insides are as gaunt as my eyes.  
But sometimes I remember my true name,  
When the moon is bright, and the stars laugh,  
When the universe bears its weight upon us.

I never again went near the trees,  
Not when they could so easily steal me,  
But I oft wonder if I am still out there,  
If I can be found in a lake somewhere drowned,  
Or hung from gallows strewn with leaves.



When I was young, I got lost in the woods.  
I broke from the home I loved dear.  
A haunting siren's song wrapped around me,  
And the voice of defeated loss pulled me in,  
Into a world I cannot ever escape.

I remember not what I saw out there  
In the place where humans will never rule,  
But as of late I have felt a disturbing stirring,  
Like dead browned leaves rustling in the wind,  
And I know the creature calls me.

I returned with frost hung in my hair,  
the broken remnants of a lost soul.  
Perhaps it was an ominous premonition,  
Which the blind sibyl failed to decipher,  
As she held me to her shaking body.

The leaves swirled like fae in their flight,  
Warning me of danger that drew near,  
But I foolishly walked into the maw of Hell,  
I tempted death's cold darkness into this game.  
I cannot leave, I cannot leave unscathed.

A chilling cry echoes from the trees,  
It strikes my soul; it jostles memories free.  
I know there exists a force larger than me,  
Whose gnashing jaw my teary eyes stared into.  
I know that it devoured me whole.

When the inky dark came finally for me,  
I wept, and tears froze upon my face.  
The piercing ice remains there to this day,  
Remains on a small broken body—  
Buried in the place where worms crawl, and rot seeps.

When I was young, I got lost in the woods.  
I broke from the home I loved dear.  
I was killed by the monster out there,  
And my spirit returned unknowingly,

To a mother who will cry when I leave again,  
And never leave my grave when they finally find me.

*Sarah Carolan*

## **The One**

The webs of frost had not yet engulfed my father's grave. I stepped closer to the loose dirt, which raised like a cancerous lesion amidst the snowy cemetery, as silent as himself.

My father, the eyesore, remained plump inside his box, full of fluids and a pattering of powdered rouge. The heirloom timepiece clasped to his hairy wrist, and an ugly tie spun around his neck. Stoicism had stalked his heart. It struck him down like a clap to a mosquito. But if he was quiet, I was quiet. I had done everything he told me to do. But as fathers are meant to die before their sons, fathers do not choose their sons. Would he be happy I came here?

I attracted those who knew my father in life. The grievers left flowers and useless gifts at my door as if I were a vindictive god. The worse I looked for wear, the more people gathered, and the more food accumulated in my refrigerator and cabinets. I could not help but wonder if the other man received the same gifts.

The other man, and my father's favorite. His one—The One. He who readily mourned. He who did not hide behind stoicism but released his grief like a pinch of salt to bring out the sweetness.

I watched The One whimper by the unfrosted plot, chuffing air into a fog. I approached as if circling prey, descending with a bout of excitement in my chest. The One had not paid his respects to me, and my appearance would surely surprise the man. If he loved my father, he would desire my approval as well. I was his image.

Leaves crackled, burning underfoot, and acorns shattered. The One turned too early, and I dropped the curl of a sneer. But he returned to the headstone without any acknowledgment.

Was his grief extraordinary? Too unmatched for spectators?

"Does it make you happy that he was buried with your tie?" I asked The One.

"It makes no difference."

The One's tailored suit clung to his chest like an envelope of folded corners. I searched for a thread to pull. I stroked my chin to the tune of late afternoon. There was nothing to be found here but hills of death and theater. But how good he was, not keeping score. Then again, his tie was buried with my father. He must consider that a victory. Or perhaps the victory lay with neither of us inheriting the timepiece.

"I'm sorry—for your loss," The One said. "I understand how you must be feeling."

There he goes again. What is sorrow without a scale? It's penance for love.

"How are you feeling?" I asked him.

"As if walking outside myself, like a ghost," he answered.

I suppose he meant a husk of his former self, or that death shaved away at his soul like shucked corn, removing the bulk of him. The One remained vacant, enriched by nothing but our rivalry. Why my father chose him, I would never understand.

"Did he tell you to be sad?" I asked.

The One's head moved, and then his shoulders followed. I gazed into his confusion.

“I miss him,” he said simply. “Did he tell you to be sad?”

The One must get off on suspicion. Flaunting his readiness for performance as if the mourners sat present, enthralled by his melancholic solo and those inimitable complexities. He knew the flourishes; to him, I was but a novice, an understudy for a part I would never play.

“It took every bit of effort to come here,” I said.

The One nodded and turned his back to me once more.

“We’re different,” I added. “I lost a father.”

“A great man, but it’s not a game of favorites.”

“No, it’s not a game.”

I watched him carefully. He may as well have been pulling a rope of handkerchiefs from his pocket, veiling antagonism with hand tricks of decorum.

“Why do you despise that I’m here?” The One asked.

It was meant as a cleaver, his words sharp and astute and threatening.

“You struck me,” I said.

“I’ve never struck you.”

“Four years ago. You and father sat in the sunroom, smoking cigars, and drinking cognac. I came to join, but you turned me away. When I refused to leave, you struck me.”

“That didn’t happen,” The One replied.

“You *happily* struck me.”

The One shook his head and continued to stare at the headstone. ‘Here lies a beloved friend,’ it spelled in perfect depression.

“Quite the opposite, actually,” The One said. “You were drunk, and your father asked you to leave. When you refused, I tried to be the voice of reason. But then your father said, ‘Punch him.’ He meant for me to punch you, but I would do no such thing. You, though, well... you always did as he said.”

I tongued the inside of my cheek. I would feel sorry for The One if not for his smugness. He thought of himself so perfect, so strategically permanent.

“Let us be friends,” The One said. “It’s what he would have wanted.”

The One held out his hand. A blue tinge flushed his nail beds, and a red gossamer of veins traced his palms.

Could I argue the last request of my father? Did he wish for us to be friends?

I did not answer but reached for his hand. It felt clammy, in danger of crumpling within my grasp like shards of clay. I did not release it. Instead, I fixed my gaze on his wrist.

The One received no explanation. I yanked him forward, pressing my back into his torso, working the metal facets free. Once I held the chain in my hand, I pushed him to the frozen earth.

“What are you doing?” The One asked through panting breaths.

“This is mine,” I said, slipping the timepiece onto my wrist. “*This* is why he wanted me to come here.”

*Shanti Hershenson*

## **The Death of Last Summer**

When the life of summer began to taper off into the deathly chill of winter, the boy spent his final days of minimal sunlight basking in the reminiscence of a constant no longer.

Just last summer, he'd spent his days in the foothills of the meadow with *her*—the beautiful girl he loved, whom he couldn't be with—hand in hand, eyes reaching for the endless stars.

“If I was permitted to,” he whispered softly, “I'd marry you in a heartbeat.”

“Promise?” she questioned as though she didn't quite believe it herself—as if she knew what her future foretold.

Still, he smiled. “Promise.”

That promise had been shattered into countless bloody pieces when an abominable monster southwest of the mountain ranges claimed her life and stripped away all that he loved; all that he *truly* loved. The whispers of her death from villages across the river only reached him days after she had perished. The news had been like a knife straight through his heart, a cold, dead reminder of the world's harshness, the truth of what could never have been. He bottled up his grief in solitude, forced to continue his work. No one was permitted to hear what had happened. No one was able to know about his reminiscence of the meadow.

So, when he returned to his cabin in a small border town, a decently tormenting view of the mountain ranges he'd morphed from loving to despising with every bone in his twenty-year-old body, he did not speak of where he had been.

“A hunting trip,” he said instead. “A *failed* hunting trip.” His stomach did not yearn with the same hunger as his brothers and sisters that civilized the crumbling town.

When the evening came around and the sun began to vanish, he wished his wife—an arranged marriage, sprouted from the poison of grief—a fair goodnight. Once alone, he folded his exhausted arms and sighed.

The sun never shined as bright as it did last summer.

*Sidratul Muntaha*

## **By My Side**

When the sun sets and I am left alone,  
When the doors shut down and there's no hope,  
When I am shunt, invalidated, and treated as a joke,  
I look at the stars and ask for your abode.

When the world's unjust to the kind,  
When life's treated by others like a ride  
But all I do is fight  
The deep dark whispers inside.

When I am criticized  
And my only wish is to hide,  
I cry and cry and cry  
Praying you were beside.

I don't know why now  
Tears don't fall from these gloomy eyes  
Maybe because of the strengthened mind  
Or perhaps the ocean has dried  
With the jolly child  
That once was alive.

I don't live for cheeky romance  
Nor do I fantasize  
As love stories are the biggest lies.  
I don't wish for a fairy-tale life  
But every day to pass by  
Without being plain and unalive  
Because then it's better to die  
But I will rise for Your might  
And You will forever be  
By my side

*Silas Reid*  
**Nightlight**

Angela tore the nightlight out of the socket three weeks after Maya's death.

It had taken her that long to set foot in the bedroom again. The rumpled sheets were dull with dust, layers of it filling the creases where her daughter's little limbs had shuffled restlessly in sleep. It had taken Maya longer than Angela's maternally sleep-deprived mind would have liked to figure out the whole sleeping issue. The room was too full of shadows, Maya would say, and so Angela had gone out and bought the light.

It had helped, somewhat.

It was a smaller than her fist, oblong and unassuming. When she plugged it into the wall, it lit up blue green like electric sea glass. Angela and Maya had gone looking, unsuccessfully, for sea glass on the rocky beaches where they took one of their mini vacations.

They had gone during the off-season, to save money, and the weather had been cloudy to boot. Far from the bright turquoise waves and soft white sand of desktop background photos, their beach trip had been downright dismal. The skies had churned gray and threatening above frigid black waves as the pair walked delicately along the cool, sharp sand.

Maya had loved it.

Her little feet had kicked up clumps of sand as she raced unabashedly into the surf, Angela running after her. They had returned to the rental house cold and exhausted, Maya looking more blue than pink, mouth stretched in a chattering grin. Angela's heart had been full of love for her strange daughter and her pockets full of broken seashells.

After removing the light, Angela threw it with all the might contained within her limp arm. It bounced indifferently against the glass pane of the window and fell onto the floor without so much as a bounce. Angela joined it on the floor for about three minutes before collecting herself, picking up the offending piece of plastic, and taking it into the kitchen to throw in the trash.

There was, of course, a perfectly serviceable trash bin in Maya's room, but it did not have a lid. The kitchen bin did, and it shut with a satisfying clang. It sounded like closure.

Still, Angela had trouble sleeping that night.

Restless shifting gave way to tossing and turning until she finally hauled herself out of bed and shuffled to the kitchen for a glass of water.

A thin slice of familiar, blue-green light glowed from the rim of the trash bin, and Angela stopped in her tracks, rubbing the blariness out of her eyes. The light did not go away.

She strode to the bin more purposefully than she'd moved in a long time and brought a foot down firmly on the pedal to raise the lid. The lid rose suddenly, as if surprised, and a hollow metallic sound reverberated around the empty kitchen. Angela peered in. In the dimness, she could only just make out the form of the nightlight, laying atop kitchen scraps and empty plastic wrappers, unlit. She eased her foot off the pedal, watching the lid close and indifferently inhaling the faint waft of garbage scent it sent her way.

She went back to bed.

Her shades were drawn, but the moon was full. Even through her closed eyes, the light still seemed to permeate, seeping in through the sheer fabric of the curtains, through the thin skin of her eyelids. Unlike her daughter, Angela had always welcomed the shadows, found too much light hard to sleep by. She had, at one point, considered shelling out the money for blackout curtains before eventually deciding against it. Better to save the money; it could always be put towards Maya's college fund.

That wouldn't be an issue anymore. But Angela scrunched her eyes anyway and buried her head under another blanket.



*Sinead McGuigan*  
**An Empty Shell**

I carry a dead baby in my arms  
How cold her small hand is in mine  
My warm tears fall into the  
Empty hollows of her eyes

Her blue lips want to cry out  
She was never felt loved  
She never felt save  
Once wrapped in human fragility  
She was broken into an empty shell  
of denial  
of mistrust  
of despair

The dead baby had a heart  
Beating in a chest of confusion  
The dead baby had a name until  
She stepped away from herself  
Bleeding faithless for too long  
That dead baby was me

Send her light  
Send her healing  
Send her hope

I carry the moon so  
My younger self can glow  
Grow in glorious dreams not  
Earthy endurance

I carry the sun so  
My children don't  
Burn in rage or hate  
They can shine in a  
World where fear or darkness rules

I carry the stars to

Guide myself  
Redesigning my future  
Filling vast empty spaces  
Creating time

I carry the earth  
Laden with memories  
Time to heal so  
My children can shape  
A new human experience  
Time to remember  
Time to heal

I carry that child into  
A world unknown  
To feel the love my children feel

I look to the sky  
Cutting barriers into lines  
The sky holding my secrets  
I just sit and watch the clouds roll by

I carry me  
This heart of anguish  
Cloaked under a darkest sky  
Until I am ready to forgive  
I grieve and cry

I am me  
Send me light  
Send me hope  
Send myself me

*Sulakshana Guha*

**When You Return**

You'll notice the quiet  
Once you're finally back home;  
The clouds have stilled to pray.

The green light bottles paving the floors  
Pursed lips wetting the chill air,  
You'll notice the quiet.

And there won't be another day,  
For you see, the town has fallen in disarray,  
The clouds have stilled to pray.

You'd fall on your knees, I think,  
Wondering if you had never left—

You'll notice the quiet.

The goddamn quiet—  
You will rinse out your ears so that all you'll hear is the sea, while  
The clouds have stilled to pray.

*Theo Villepontoux*  
**To Shirley L. Ledford**

you went into the van  
seeing only a man  
you could not understand  
the existence of a plan

he drove you over  
round the other corner  
so no one would bother  
your ensuing torture

in order to get away  
from the end of your stay  
all you did was obey  
to survive the next day

as the hours passed by  
and you tried to comply  
by the look of his eye  
you knew you would die

and when he was done  
and had all his fun  
you just wished for a gun  
so you could succumb

taken by a monster  
my poor little flower  
you came out of nature  
without any power

*Travis Flatt*

## Poison Control

“Should I throw up?”

I’ve poured my pills into piles on the carpet. I’m counting them. Four piles: red and white capsules; orange octagonal tablets; white oval tablets; white square tablets. I need to figure out if I took my nightly dose of medication twice. Checking the number of pills against bottle labels should answer this question. How many pills *should* I have, opposed to how many I actually have. I’m pretty sure that I swallowed my usual three thousand-ish milligrams of anticonvulsants with Sprite Zero and a granola bar earlier—I have a clear memory of that (also, the granola bar is now a wrapper), but between then (first dose) and now, I wandered the house on the phone with my brother, talking about an upcoming audition. On the phone—that’s when I may have absent-mindedly taken a repeat, second dose. Most weeks, I forget to put my pills in a pill tray. That would prevent this scenario. My wife, who is on a weekend trip with her mom, is driven crazy by my neglect of pill trays. I just forget them; I go weeks taking my meds straight from their bottles. For fear of seizures, I never miss my medication, and yet can’t remember pill trays. They’re a pain in the ass, always spilling everywhere.

Because I occasionally take extra pills at lunch to counterbalance the caffeine that I’m not supposed to drink but do anyway (my meds make me drowsy), I’m not sure that the piles and the pill bottles add up in a conclusive way. Too close to tell.

“Should I throw up?” It’s my dad I ask on the phone about vomiting. He’s a vet, and therefore gets all the family’s medical questions. I called him after counting the pill piles. It’s 10:15. Every night, dad drinks wine to help him sleep, a habit that concerns my brother and I because dad’s diabetic. “How long ago did you take the pills,” he says, meaning the first dosage, the granola bar dosage. I figure the granola-dose would have been an hour ago and the on-the-phone dose thirty minutes. He says that it’s probably too late: all those pills would have dissolved into my system by now, and not to worry about it. Vomiting won’t make any difference. I should drink some water, though. He doesn’t sound sure enough to convince me, and I get off the phone to call poison control.

Poison control answers immediately. I’m still sitting on the carpet in front of those piles of pills, and the technician or whatever, a lady with an Alabama drawl, asks the nature of my emergency? I explain that I think I’ve accidentally taken a second massive dosage of powerful pills.

“Your body builds up tolerance to any regular medications,” she says, but adds that I should call an ambulance if I feel chest pain. I sense this is a regular call for her and there’s a maternal note in her voice. On a personal call, she’d probably call me “honey” or “sugar.” She’s soothing. I wish this was a personal call.

“I’m on a very high dose of—” I list the medications, but she only repeats that I’ve built up a tolerance. I hear phones ringing in her background; she wants to end the call. I start to tell

her what happened again, but she asks if I have any more questions and when I start to repeat my situation she just hangs up.

I lie on the floor and wait to die or enter a coma.

Recently, I published a string of poems. Some friends congratulated me via social media, though I assume most never bothered to read them. My dad congratulated me effusively. Work is going well, though it's only part-time substitute teaching at the high school. I aspire to teach full-time, and I'm slowly making good with the administration. All things considered; this is the happiest I've been in years. It's my second marriage. The first one ended badly, but it seems we've all moved past that now. My dad, I mean. He liked her. He took it hard.

I'll admit that it's tempting to write a maudlin Facebook post and tell off my friends because they never support my writing. Maybe the local directors who denied me roles I wanted, too. But I decide that if I've accidentally committed suicide, it'd be better not to burn bridges.

I want people to miss me. Everyone wonders how many people might attend their funeral. That would make a great App, one that could tally how many people would come to your funeral. I just need a catchy name.

Well, I might as well use this time in some constructive way. I'd been looking forward to a night alone. Normally, I'd read some recently published poems in the hot online journals for inspiration, though I usually only skim these as they tighten my chest with envy.

It's been fifteen minutes, and my wife calls to say goodnight via FaceTime. I'm annoyed when she doesn't say anything, only rambles, tipsy, makes silly faces. I don't have time for this. I should be writing my magnum opus, my swan song. I lie and say I'm going to bed. Of course, I never mention poison control because I don't want to start an actual conversation.

And I don't want to worry her. I guess.

I drink a Coke and try to concentrate on reading a poem on a hipster website. It's about ghosts. They're all about ghosts. I hate it.

Thirty minutes later, I poop out a poem about ghosts, then send it off to several journals, including the *Kenyon Review*. Fingers crossed.

One hour, and I'm not dead, so, *carpe diem*. I'll carpet bomb the journal-verse with my poem. What the hell: an actor, I'm immune to rejection. I'm on a race against the clock, anyway, what with these pills doing Christ knows what to my liver etc., and my brain slowly electrocuting itself.