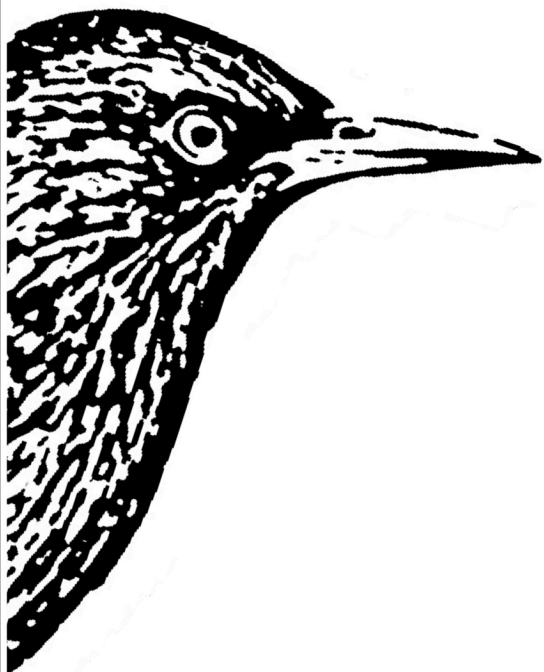


FRIGHTMARRISH ZINE



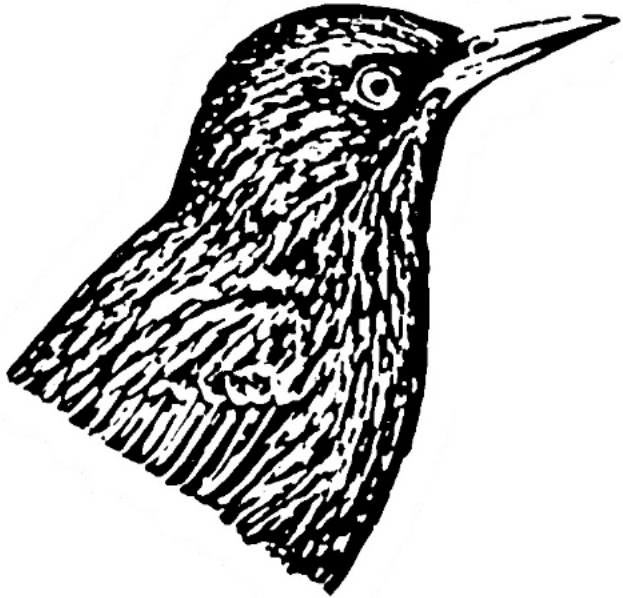
ISSUE ONE

FRIGHTMARISH ZINE

ISSUE ONE

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THE
CULLING

Mama used to tell me you don't always gotta shout to make your voice heard. She said sometimes, all it takes is a whisper, that even the quietest words can break a man.

Back when we was all kids, she used to sit on the steps murmuring to the chattering starlings that took roost in the old hayloft. I used to think she was just passing time waiting for Pa, in case he decided to come back. Now I know Mama forgot about Pa a long time ago.

She waited on them birds, like they her kin. One

starling turned into two, and then a half dozen, and then so many we gave up keeping count. Even when they swooped and swirled out over the corn fields and disappeared at daybreak, we could always count on them comin' back.

Those steps where Mama sat waiting sink down low in the middle, with the boards gone smooth and dull over time. The paint on the house gone weary too, and most of the shutters have rot deep into their core like Mama's bones. I don't bother bringing the rusted paint cans or ladder out from the barn no

more. Oh, I'm sturdy enough to do so, mind. But the work is tiresome by myself. I much prefer spending the time reading to Mama, or just sitting on the veranda. The fireflies flicker in time to the twitter and twirl of them starlings up in Mama's prized pecan trees. Makes me wanna shine just like they do.

Livin' here is lonesome now, 'specially with Mama taking permanently to her bed on the top floor. I miss the times she'd come and sit a spell with me. The rockers of her chair would grind against the wooden floorboards like the rumble of an oncoming storm. I don't hear that sound no more, 'cept if the wind rolls down from the highlands. When it do, I imagine Mama's sitting right here beside me.

After they heard her condition took a turn, the boys told me they'd be coming out. It wasn't out of concern, though, I can tell you. None of them have been back to these parts in Lord knows how many years. At first, I thought maybe it was outta guilt, them comin' back, but now I know it's more outta want. I can tell soon as they pull up the drive and pile out that old motor car. The way they tug on them starched collars. How they look up at the sky like they in some alien place. Them boys didn't care enough to come 'round 'til they heard of Mama's dying. They ain't just here to say their final goodbyes, or to see the old house one last time. No, they here for something worth more than some little trinket to remember Mama by.

Jokes on them, because the things we got? They ain't worth much to no one but me. All the bits and bobs Mama collected all these years be diamonds in my eyes. Them boys, they just see things to get rid of. Burdens to box up and cart away. Same way they see Mama. Same way they see me. Like right now, they inside horsing around like they was kids again and not grown men here to see Mama for the last time. So I stay out here keeping vigil next to her old rocker, waiting for the moon to rise and them starlings to stir.

The fluttering starts with tiny ripples, and then feathers snap and smooth before they take flight. This used to be my favorite time of night. Now it reminds me soon Mama'll be gone and it'll be just me and them starlings and the flickery fireflies. I'll love 'em still, but it won't be the same when there's no Mama to share 'em with.

Boot steps sound on the floorboards inside, and the screen door wheezes open and slams a time or two on the door frame.

"Those damnable things is still here, I see," Joe says, squinting and looking up.

"I like 'em," I say. I pretend not to see the sideways glance he gives me. It's the same one he used to do when we was little, and he thought I said something simple-minded.

The bird-cloud sweeps overhead, black ink on grey sky. They cry out, a million tiny voices all screaming to the heavens. I tilt my head back, close my eyes, and I almost hear Mama talkin' through them. That sweet melody in her voice when she's happy; the slow, mournful sob when she remembers all the folk who left her behind. It's beautiful and sorrowful all at once and makes my heart hurt, but I listen anyway.

"Yeah, well once Mama's gone, them birds are too."

The birdsong drops away and I glare at Joe. It's twilight now. The dying light is a gleam in his dark eyes, making him look like some kinda evilness on two legs. He stands above me with his shoulders back and his chest thrust out to make himself look big. He clamps his lips together to keep from looking too satisfied with himself.

I glare up at him. "You can't."

"Who says?"

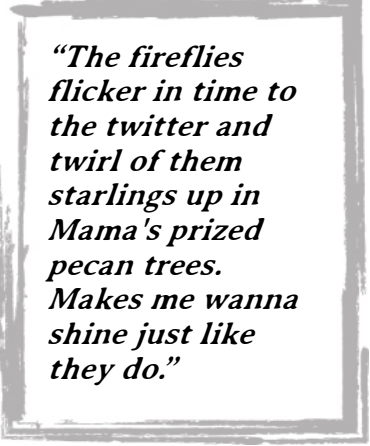
"Me. I say."

This time, his laughter comes like stinging hail, pricking the back of my neck.

"You the youngest in the family, Gemma. You think we gonna allow you to make decisions? Why you think no folk been comin' out to check on Mama? They afraid of what those nasty little devils'll do to them. No ma'am, the moment Mama's gone, we getting them out once and for all."

And me too. You just itching to get me out so you can have Mama's house all for yourselves. Tear it to bits and pieces before you sell it off and leave it behind forever, just like Pa did.

The shrill whine of the screen door interrupts and Bobby comes out. He has Joe's coloring, but his face looks all blanched now, like the old fence posts lining the drive. He got them kind eyes like Mama, even if they look all lonesome after his visit. With



"The fireflies flicker in time to the twitter and twirl of them starlings up in Mama's prized pecan trees. Makes me wanna shine just like they do."

his arms hanging limp at his sides, Bobby plods past us down the steps, toward the barn, without even noticing us there.

"That must mean she's ready to see me." Joe turns and takes a few steps before stopping. "You might wanna say your own goodbyes. I'm guessing Mama don't have long now. Them birds don't neither."

The door clatters behind him as he goes inside. I jump up and follow right after him, warning him through the screen.

"You and Tommy be real soft and quiet, you hear, Joe? Don't you go turning up them oil lamps none. Mama don't like that. And tell Tommy to leave them drapes be."

Joe is up them stairs before I even finish. When I turn to leave, Tommy appears on the other side of the screen. He looks at me sideways, and then looks away real quick, like he can't bring himself to catch my eye.

"He don't mean to be so hard, Gemma. He just...Mama leaving upsets him."

"He sure don't act like it bothers him."

"You know Joe. He always been this way."

"And you go right along with him, don't ya?"

Tommy kicks at the floorboards and sighs, still looking past me. "Come on now, Gemma. Don't get on that old song and dance again, huh? Not now. It ain't the time."

"It ain't never the time. You let them run right over ya all your life. Now they gonna do the same to me. Well, no sir. I ain't gonna let it happen. And mark my words. Mama won't neither."

I turn away from him and take a seat on the top step, pretending he ain't there no more. I just gotta wait them out. They'll be gone soon enough.

Propping my hands behind me, I lean back and breathe in the balminess of the night jasmine. The starlings swoop and twirl overhead in the fading light. It's like they're putting on a show, twisting themselves into ribbons, a liquid smooth cloud doing one last dance for Mama.

#

It's night by the time Joe finishes his visit with Mama. He's all quiet and don't say nothing when he goes out to the barn the same way Bobby done earlier.

I'm sat in the same spot when Tommy comes down next. Like Bobby and Joe before him, his skin's gone all poorly and he's looking at the ground like Mama threatened to give him a licking same as when we was kids. Maybe he just finally come to reason

and he seen the coming of the end for himself. When he starts down the steps toward the barn, I know it's time.

I stand and stretch. The house is dark and still when I go inside, the way Mama and I like it. I climb them same stairs I known since I was a girl, and pause outside her door. This'll be my last time seeing Mama with all her things around her. I want to remember every bit.

The door shushes open. Powdery perfume lingers like a whisper from when I spritzed Mama earlier. Gauzy drapery cocoons her bed, and the flame in the oil lanterns lick the glass slow like honey. Mama's still the same way I set her before the boys arrived. At least them boys listened to me for once.

Something dark shifts in the corner. When I step inside, there is a soft rustling, and then a quick clicking that gives way to a lilting warble.

"It's me. Gemma. Come now. Come on out, lovely."

The starling hops out from her hiding place and tilts her head up at me. Her feathers are shiny black, glossed with a shimmering purple and green sheen in the right light. She flutters then flattens her feathers again, showing off a scatter of white freckles across her back as she sings a smooth liquid song.

"There you are, lovely."

"Love-lovely," she says between creaks and warbles.

"That's a good girl. You gotten real good at that, learn real fast."

I hold out my finger, and the bird hops up into place. She knows me well enough already, but in the past month since Mama's health turned, she's really taken a shine to me. Sometimes she even sounds like me too, though she much prefers mimicking Mama. This time her clear whistle, a descending wheeeeeeeoooooo, is extra mournful. When she starts chattering again, my heart hurts. It's the only way I'll ever hear Mama's voice anymore.

"Y-you are nothing." Her throat rolls and her feathers twitch when she talks. A few chirps and clicks from her long sharp bill to punctuate the sentence.

"No, no, darlin'. That's alright, you hush now," I say, petting her back feathers sleek.

She tilts her head and blinks. "Not my boys. No more."

I get a sad smile. Sounds just like Mama, just like I taught her. "You don't have to say that no more, lovely."

"Hate you," she says. She makes a wheezy sound like Mama used to when she had trouble catching her breath, and then she blinks at me. "All you boys."

I try to distract her by whistling. This time it's me mimicking her, pretending I'm one of the flock, her kin, showing her how to be a songbird again. She squints up at me, learning again, remembering. After some time, she starts singing long and clear, a song all her own.

She lets me stand and take her to the window. I sit on the sill and we listen to the warbling melody of the flock outside. They're perched high up in the pecan trees, calling her back to them.

"Go on now, girl. Your work's done. Be free."

I hang my hand outside the window. She just sits and stares at me a spell, tilts her head and blinks.

"Gem-ma - gem-ma," she sings, embellishing my name with a trill and dulcet tone. I close my eyes and feel the burn of tears. Don't she sound just like Mama.

She chatters at me a bit more, then fluffs herself up real pretty before ducking and taking flight. Her flock greets her with a series of hissing ssssheeers before she joins in their chattering, whistling chorus.

"She home now, Mama, home with her kin."

The room stays quiet. No Mama to answer. Behind the drapes, her face is hard and still, the way it set a few days ago when she left me and her light fell dark, her shine all gone.

It feels hollow in here now, so still, and the night so dark. But out in the barn, lantern light gleams in the window. There's still work to do.

Leaving is easy now that it's only me. I move to the doorway and head down them creaky stairs. Soon enough I'm out onto the porch and down the steps in double-time. Overhead, the whooshing sound of the flock draws me, but I can't stop to watch like usual. I got work to do.

I remember to put on Pa's tattered work gloves before I take up the old hatchet. Hauling out the ladder ain't so bad, nor climbing up it neither. Heights don't scare me none. The wheelbarrow is already in position, so things'll go easier. I take it round to the door, and stop 'til my eyes adjust to the darkness.

Bobby's already gone. Joe stands in the hayloft next to him with the rope 'round his neck. It's cool and damp inside. The peaty perfume of topsoil comforts me some. Joe gives me a

faraway look then steps off. There is a harsh shushing and then the quick snap of rope jerked tight.

Without skipping a beat, Tommy climbs up into the place where Joe just stood. He hitches the rope and slips into the noose easy, and then looks at me something wistful. His lips move ever so slight, but before he says a word, something rustles in the shadows above him.

It's a faint whispering, like a stolen breath, a sound like the gentle caress of a hand across velvet. There's another. Then still more. That's when I know it ain't the wind outside but the snap-smooth of shiny black feathers flicking together.

The first bird churrs so sharp, it gives me a start. She waits a beat, then whistles a tune all the way up the scale then back down again so quick, it makes my heart hammer in my chest. She don't stop, though, no. She keeps on, like she's sweet-talkin' the others to join in. Even though it takes some time, they start singing, too, a jumbled warbling that sounds like a hundred tiny voices when they really get going.

"Not my boys. No more. Hate you. Hate all you boys."

Tommy darts a glance down at me. His eyes are wide, like he now sees something that was there all along.

But he don't say nothing. His mind's already set. Them words he heard up in Mama's room already weigh on him so. Hearing them again only breaks him for good.

He takes that last step and follows Bobby and Joe like he always done.

I wait. It don't take long for him to go neither.

I bring round the ladder and do Joe first, since he's the biggest. Cutting his rope takes a few chops before I break through. He falls to the loft and slumps in a heap. I shove him over the edge with all my might 'til he tumbles from the loft into the steel tray. His arms and legs hang over almost to the dirt. I climb down and wheel him into the back of the barn where I dug them holes when I first heard the boys was coming. I can't be sure if it were Mama or the starling told me to do so, or maybe just me, but that don't matter now.

When I tilt the wheelbarrow he falls in hard, like so much regret. The new sheet in the pit is starched white, just like Mama liked 'em. The older sheet in the pit gone almost black now, flat and withered away, matching what lies beneath. Mama always said Joe was tall like as Pa. Layin' next to him, I see it now.

Outside, the wind rolls down from the highlands. The birds let out a harsh rattle before they settle in to roost. Makes me wonder what they said when they broke Pa, but we was kids then so that don't matter now neither.

I make sure to throw the rope in with them before I wheel the cart back and position it under Tommy. The pale lantern light shining up in Mama's window gives me pause. I stare up at it through the open barn door, almost wishing to see her shadow up there.

That's when I notice Joe's car parked up to the house. Can't forget to pull it into the barn and tarp it for the night. It'll keep. In a few days, I might even take it for a spin in the woods out back the acreage. Maybe even roll it into the Roubidoux Creek, let the rainy season fill it with mud 'til it ain't nothing but a heap of bad memories rusting in the grave.

When old Mr. Grisholm comes later in his big black hearse, I'll tell him how I wanted to be able to say my last goodbyes. How I wanted to take my time with Mama. I'll tell him how when she passed, we was alone, and we was happy, that we deserved that at last.

I head back to where the other boys is hanging, looking up at them instead of the way they always looked down on me.

I climb up for Tommy next. He ain't so big as Joe, but wheeling him will still be a chore. I'm sturdy enough to do so, mind. And I don't feel bad about it neither.

They could'a been like them birds if they only took a chance, been as flickery as fireflies, shined like diamonds.

I tell you one thing. I ain't gonna be like them boys. I got my own song to sing. I ain't gonna whisper it no more, neither.

- END -

WORD SEARCH

FIND ALL THE HIDDEN WORDS THAT APPEAR IN THE CULLING

N W M C H I R P R E W A B V Z
 T D G Q O N B E A H O S N I K
 D H D N F Q K U I M E J A P Y
 D E G D I C H S R I A K M M H
 P N Y I I R P A L D J M M F L
 Y I I L L E U F T N E O E E A
 L O F W R F E M Y C T N G A D
 E L T T A R G F R R H W I T D
 K Z I Z I G C N E U O E H H E
 Y E H F G O S T I H M C T E R
 B G M A F J T E O L T G M R V
 B E K B O A G X Q S R A S S M
 O Y V V H E P O R F U A E A R
 B U Y C X S B B I R D S T R D
 A F L O C K L W W S F O K S B

KEYWORDS

BIRDS	CHIRP	FLOCK	LADDER	SAD
BOBBY	FEATHERS	GEMMA	MAMA	STARLING
BREATH	FIREFLIES	HATCHET	MURMURING	TOMMY
BURDEN	FLICKER	JOE	RATTLE	WHISPER
CHATTER	FLIGHT	KIN	ROPE	WIND

BREEDING GROUND:

The Art of Ornithomancy

BIRDS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN SURROUNDED BY SUPERSTITION. FROM CROWS TO MAGPIES AND DOVES TO SPARROWS, MUCH FOLKLORE SURROUNDS OUR FEATHERED FRIENDS.

From their coloring to the number of birds spotted at one time, from their well-timed appearances and fascinating flight patterns, there are many opportunities to find messages or signs in the appearance of our feathered friends.



But long before Alfred Hitchcock unleashed his film adaptation of British author Daphne du Maurier's tale of violent attacks in California, people have feared birds - and not simply for the threat of being swarmed or injured.

Some thought birds, especially those that are darkly-colored, brought ill omens with them.

One superstition was that a bird flying indoors meant someone in the household would soon die. Some also believed that birds were associated with witchcraft and the Devil.

Others, though, practiced the art of ornithomancy, a method of divination where one studies the flight patterns and movements of birds.

One of the most striking things about starlings are their murmurations. The Romans were said to believe these shapes created by flocks of starlings were messages being sent to them by the gods.

After interpreting the shapes, they used these messages to make decisions, leaving it up to the birds to tell them if the

Gods favored their actions that day. Could battles have been decided by ornithomancy? Maybe!

Looking For Signs

If you want to try your hand at ornithomancy, here are a few signs to look out for:

Crows: if a single bird flies three times over a roof, perches on it, or flutters around a window, it is a death omen for someone inside

Magpies: a lone magpie circling a home is said to be a portent of death.

Sparrows: embody the souls of the dead. It's unlucky for one to fly in the house

Ravens: flying toward the sun means good weather is on the way. If they preen themselves while flying, it's a portent of rain



Mozart's "Musical Joke"

Mozart's Werke. für 2 Violinen, Viola, Bass und 2 Hörner von **W. A. MOZART.** Serie 10. N° 13.
Köch. Verz. N° 522. Composit in Wien am 11. Juli 1782.

Allegro.

Corn in F.
Violino I.
Violino II.
Viola.
Basso.

Inspired by his pet Starling, Mozart penned a piece that mimicked the bird's lilting song. Have you ever heard it? Did it remind you of a starling's song?

COLOR BY NUMBERS

GET OUT YOUR COLORED PENCILS, MARKERS OR WATERCOLORS AND COLOR THE IMAGE BELOW



COLOR PALETTE



BECOME A PATRON

DO YOU LIKE EXCLUSIVE CONTENT? NEW STORIES AND POETRY? A BEHIND-THE-SCENES SCOOP ON HOW STORIES ARE CREATED? BECOMING ONE OF MY SUPPORTERS ON PATREON GIVES YOU ACCESS TO MY CREATIVE LIFE WITH SPECIAL PERKS FOR ALL TIERS

Starting at just \$1, each level of support offers different perks including:



- Access to the Patrons-only feed with news & updates, new short stories, sneak peeks, contests, cover reveals etc.
- A digital copy of my quarterly 'zine with themed stories/poetry and art



All rewards from the previous support tier, as well as:

- EARLY ACCESS to all posts
- A digital copy of my quarterly 'zine with themed stories/poetry and art
- Inklings: Story Extras (character profiles, research etc.)
- Breeding Ground (story inspiration and how I turn ideas into stories)



All rewards from the previous support tiers, as well as

- A print copy of my quarterly 'zine with themed stories, poetry, art and other fun content



All rewards from the previous support tiers, as well as:

- BE MY INSPIRATION: You will become a character in one of my stories



All of the rewards from the previous support tiers, as well as:

- SHOUT-OUT: Your name will appear in the Credits of any works published during my Patreon campaign

To read my unlocked posts and to sign up, visit my page at
patreon.com/maryrajotte

Published in 2022*I Am What Grows In Shadowed Places*

Featured in 99 Tiny Terrors from Pulse Publishing

Words Unspoken and My Tainted Touch

Featured in Under Her Skin from Black Spot Books

The Call of the Carrion Crows

Featured in Haunted: A Crow Showcase from Quill & Crow Publishing House

Oh, But Her Beautiful Eyes

Featured in The Dead Inside from Dark Dispatch

What The Dead Whisper To The Living

Featured in A Quaint and Curious Volume of Gothic Tales from Brigid's Gate Press

Published in 2021*What The Earth Bore*

Featured in Grimm & Dread: A Crow's Twist on Classic Tales, Quill & Crow Publishing House

Murmurations

Featured in The Crow's Quill Issue 4 - Tales by the Full Moon

The Blight of Black Creek

Featured in In Somnio from Tenebrous Press

We Wicked Few

Featured in The Witches Ball from Jazz House Publications

Those Forgotten Places

Featured in Autumn Noir from Unsettling Reads

ALTERED WORDS

TIME TO CREATE SOME BLACKOUT POETRY FROM THIS MONTH'S STORY! CROSS OUT ANY WORDS BELOW THAT YOU WANT TO OMIT AND THEN COPY THE WORDS THAT REMAIN IN THE PROVIDED SPACE.

The house is dark and still when I go inside, the way Mama and I like it. I climb them same stairs I known since I was a girl, and pause outside her door. This'll be my last time seeing Mama with all her things around her. I want to remember every bit.

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WRITE YOUR POEM HERE

Share your poems on social media with **#thefrightmaresociety**
Or tag me! **@MaryRajotte** on **Twitter** and **Instagram**

An excerpt from MURMURATIONS

GRIEVING HIS LOST LOVE, A MAN SEEKS THE HELP OF A CUNNING WOMAN AND HER DARK BIRDS

At the end of a serpentine path, high in the crooked trees, birds of all kinds—some that chitter and sing, others that mimic and mock—announce my arrival at the cunning woman’s cottage. I race to her door, with the setting sun and the impending darkness thereafter hastening my task.



When her gnarled face appears at the glaucous window, I clutch my trembling hands before me, waiting for her to slip from the weatherworn dwelling. Birdsong eddies and swirls in a torrent overhead until she lifts a hand and the creatures cease their chatter.

“What brings you to my door, Nicolas?” The old woman croaks.

“Time has stolen my beloved in a method most cruel.” I rub my teary eyes with the heel of my palm. “Will you grant me one more day? An hour? I ask but for a morsel, something to savor for the rest of

my days, until Elodie and I are together once more.”

READ MURMURATIONS in The Crow’s Quill Magazine

November 2021 - Tales By The Full Moon from Quill & Crow Publishing House

quillandcrowpublishinghouse.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Canadian author Mary Rajotte has a penchant for penning nightmarish tales of folk horror and paranormal suspense. Sometimes camera-elusive but always coffee-fueled, you can contact her at her website **maryrajotte.com**

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