

THE RAVEN

&

THE WRITING DESK

STORIES AND POEMS FROM THE ANTELOPE VALLEY

VOLUME VI

THE RAVEN & THE WRITING DESK

Stories and Poems from the Antelope Valley

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G.L.H.

HOW IS A RAVEN LIKE A WRITING DESK?

Lewis Carroll. ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Joan Fry & Margaret L. Priddy

A raven and a writing desk—what do they have in common?

Every story, poem, and essay in this year's anthology was written on some kind of desk. A few specifically mention ravens. Most do not. All invite the reader to meditate upon life's great themes—the nature of childhood, love, water, companion animals, racial and ethnic differences, ghost-haunted families, antagonistic ants, and every subject in between. Some will beguile you. Others will make you cry. A few may disgust you, or send you racing into the kitchen to check if that can of Raid is still under the sink.

Except for the writing desk, the only attribute these works have in common is how varied they are—as varied and unpredictable as the desert wind that can find a spark of fire in an arid landscape, turn itself into a blowtorch, and cause a roiling firestorm of destruction. It can snatch a child's balloon and carry it into the clouds, far beyond his reach. It can swirl around a woman's bare legs when her arms are filled with groceries and whip up her dress as though she were Marilyn Monroe. But wind can deliver the delicate scent of honeysuckle into your bedroom on a spring evening. Or it can be completely domesticated, its power converted into electricity. The wind not only mimics human capabilities, but is a direct and spontaneous expression of the full range of our emotions. The entries in this year's anthology prove that.

As the sun goes down tonight, and the ravens soar into the darkening sky with a silken rustle of wings, sink

into your favorite chair, pour yourself a glass of the good stuff, make sure the cats and dogs are all accounted for, and abandon yourself to the pleasures of the book in your hands, the sixth annual Antelope Valley anthology. Never mind the clamor of the wind outside, or the frantic scratching of branches against the windows, or the howling at your door.

What *do* ravens and writing desks have in common? Lewis Carroll, whose character asks that question, answered it himself: “the riddle as originally invented, had no answer at all.” In other words—absolutely nothing.

DEDICATION

**This sixth Antelope Valley Anthology
is dedicated to
Charles Lutwidge Dodgson
1832-1898
RIP**

**who made sense of nonsense
and
from whom we stole our title.**

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MAKEEBA'S CROSSING

Margaret L. Priddy

I sit in the lap of an acacia tree and dangle my legs. Behind me, the tree trunk casts a towering shadow like the long neck of a giraffe. The branches of the acacia make gnarled funny faces on the grassland. My hands and fingers twist together to make a weaverbird, and I hold the shape into the spears of the sun. But when I look back at the ground, I do not see the shadow of the bird.

Below me are two nomadic lions with ratty manes. One lion has puncture marks on his head and has his front paws aligned. As he slides his paws forward, his whole body sinks, slowly, lazily until he is swallowed by the burnt, yellow grass. The other lion has wounds on his neck and back. He stares up at me.

I gaze out over my village, a settlement of huts called a *kraal*. A fence made of thorn bushes surrounds it. At night cows, goats, sheep and other domestic animals are put into a pen inside the *kraal* to keep them safe from wild animals. For now the domestic animals graze a distance away, watched over by warriors.

A jeep stirs the dust as it drives along the dirt road toward my village. The driver wears a cap with a bill and has dark skin. He brings tourists to my village sometimes. He is a guide. Two people are with him, a man and woman. They stop at the gate to the *kraal*. I swing down from my post. I am not afraid of the lions. When I reach the gate, the tourists are out of the car. The woman brushes aside loose strands of

hair—a golden color like the mane of the lions—that straggle around her face. A camera dangles from a strap around her wrist. Dressed in slacks and a short-sleeved shirt, she looks plain next to the Maasai women who have gathered just on the other side of the gate. The Maasai women wear colorful red and orange *shukas*, a one-piece garment that wraps around the body. And they show off their necklaces, bibs of beads, sun kissed and glinting around their necks.

The Maasai elder accepts money from the man and woman and extends his wiry arm out to welcome them. Inside the gate, boys and girls scramble out of the way. The couple drifts toward ten young warriors who are doing the jumping dance for them. They jump as high as they can to show how fit they are. The warriors invite the man and woman to jump with them. The man finally accepts. He has the wide rump of a rhino and legs that jut down like tree stumps from under his shorts. He can barely lift himself off the ground, and when his ankle turns over, and he stumbles, the guide and some warriors catch him. The women and we girls snicker behind our hands, but from the throat of my little brother comes a loud hyena laugh. The man laughs too. His ears redden. He and the woman are husband and wife. They buy beaded necklaces from the women and us girls. I used to make and sell necklaces too.

When the woman asks to take pictures, the elder nods. She gets a close-up of him, of his skin blackened by the sun and turned into cowhide. Snap. She focuses the camera on his long, loose red garment. Snap. Does she know red stands for power? The camera clicks next to his earlobe. Both lobes have been pierced. And over time larger and larger objects have been inserted to where plastic film containers can fit into the holes. The elder hooks his finger into the hole of one ear and pulls it down. The lobe almost touches his shoulder.

The Maasai women pose sheepishly before the lens, and

the woman snaps a picture of their shaved heads. She then swings her camera down to snap their feet. Some women are barefoot; some wear sandals soled with tire treads. Click, click, click. She catches the spirit of the village and of the warriors who are still jumping.

The man suddenly curses loudly and slaps at a fly that bites him behind the knee. When he gets himself together, he asks the elder about his status in the village.

The elder speaks some English. "I am senior elder and advisor. Me and other senior elders decide community matters."

The husband wipes sweat from his forehead. "How many children do you have?"

"Eight now," the elder says. "One daughter missing."

"How long has she been missing?"

"Three years. She was eleven."

My mother comes out of her *inkajjik*, a circular hut, and enters the *inkajjik* of another wife of my father. They and other women are repairing the roof of another hut. In one spot on the hut, the frame opens to the sky. It must be repaired before the long rains come. The *inkajjik* itself is made of wooden poles sunk deep into the ground. The poles are interwoven with many branches to make a tight lattice. It is the lattice on this hut that is damaged. As the other women finish weaving the branches closely between two poles to bridge the gap, my mother mixes together mud, sticks, ash, grass, cow dung and human urine in a gourd. She then plasters the tight lattice with the mixture. She knows I am behind her, but she does not turn around. She just starts talking.

"Makeeba," she says, "do not worry about Pendo."

"I do not worry about him," I say.

Mama pats and smoothes the plaster in place with a flat

bone from a cow. “You should never have been tending that goat. You should have been concerned with milking cows, fetching water and gathering firewood. But your mind was always somewhere else. And you always let Pendo escape.”

“But he came back.”

“That he-goat was too much for you to handle. When you scolded him it did not keep him from running away. Your frowning at him did not either. Makeeba,” she says, finally turning around, “frowning frogs do not keep cows from drinking from the pool.” Mama does not pay attention to the women who are watching her. “Your sisters and brothers will marry, but you never will because of your foolishness!”

One of the other women rubs my mother on her back, trying to calm her. I leave. Why do I come see her when it upsets her? It is because she is the only one who talks to me.

Months ago, boys between the ages of 14 to 16, with no anesthesia, faced the knife. A man with many years of experience performed the circumcisions. If the boys cried out or flinched during the operation, they would bring shame to themselves and their families and would be teased by their age-sets. Of course, if they moved, the knife could slip.

Everyone in the village attended the ceremony. There was dancing. Women sang songs that praised their sons. The women made custard: curdled milk mixed with ox blood. There was roasted mutton and goat meat. One of the goats eaten was Pendo.

Now the boys live in a camp for junior warriors to learn animal husbandry and what their roles are as protectors of their villages. They will stay here for 10 years. After that, they can become senior warriors and get married.

Azizi is one of these junior warriors. He is not much different from his age-set. All are thin and long-limbed. And like them, his ochre-dyed braids tickle his dark shoulders.

But to me, he is more handsome than the rest. I want to touch my fingertips to his skin and feel the toned, contoured muscles of his arms. His eyes sweep out over the rolling grass prairie. He loses himself there until I say, "You will have wives and many children and a lot of cattle. Is that what you are daydreaming about?" Azizi comes back to attention. The elders are saying: "Be observant when herding. There are hundreds of places ferocious animals can conceal themselves. Even hippos can hide in the dark."

I always dreamed of marrying Azizi. But according to Maasai custom, it could never happen. Azizi was only four years older than me. Maasai men married much younger girls. Besides, the God, *Enkai* had made other plans.

My age mates, girls between 10 and 15 years old also face the knife. If they do not, the men might refuse to marry them or the bride price of cattle might be reduced. Either way, the girls would bring shame on themselves and their families. But I was not with my age group when they got cut.

A year after the girls are cut, they marry older men. I was booked for marriage when I was born, promised by my father to one of his older friends. I was to marry him when I was 13. I was so sad, I cried all the time. I did not want to leave the village of my mother and to marry an old man. I wanted to go to school, but there were too many chores to do at home. My mother and father did not see any point in me getting an education. But if I got married, at least my father would get valuable cattle from my husband as a dowry. I did not know what to do, but *Enkai* saved me.

The jeep, the guide, and the couple are back at the gate. They will not stay long since the sun will be dying soon. Even now the ochre-colored blood is oozing from the sun and is staining the horizon.

The woman holds a long piece of wood and a black

marker in her hands. The elder who spoke with the visitors earlier is my father. He gives the woman permission to put up the sign on the acacia tree.

“But Makeeba still be missing,” he says. “She never come back.”

The husband says to my father, “The guide told us this morning that when you use the word, ‘missing,’ you mean she died. He said she died beneath the tree.”

My father says, “It is true. And it made she mother sick here.” My father taps his head with his fingernail. Then he tugs at his droopy earlobe. “Makeeba missing because she danced in the doorway of the cat.”

I will tell everybody exactly what happened, but they probably will not be able to hear me. I will try. “I had a pet goat named Pendo,” I said. “One evening when it was almost dark, he got out of the *kraal* again. I was afraid wild animals would get him, and my father would punish me. So I ran after him. Just outside the gate, I looked around a long time and saw no danger. Many yards away, in the knee-high grass by the acacia tree, Pendo grazed. I caught up to him and was about to put a rope around his neck and bring him back when he started bleating and bucking and swinging his head. ‘Pendo, what is wrong with you?’ I asked. ‘You got a tsetse fly buzzing around in your head?’ He knocked the rope out of my hand and darted back toward the *kraal*.”

“I felt around in the grass for the rope. But I realized I should not do that. Suppose I reached for the rope and brought up an angry puff adder instead? At the same time, I wondered if something scared Pendo instead of him just fighting against the rope.”

“When I was thinking these thoughts, a lion rose up silently out of the grass a few yards in front of me. My screams fill the air. I saw the sound waves from my screams—silvery, crescent-shaped waves—ripple up into the

evening sky.

“The ears of the lion laid flat against his head. His muscles were bunched, and his eye-shine was blinding. I had stopped screaming and started to back up toward the *kraal* when I saw the second lion in position behind me. His body was long, lean, tense. Time slowed. The first cat jumped into the air. He had huge feet with razor claws. When his maw snapped open, I saw fangs like daggers. It seemed like he was in the air a long time, coming at me in slow motion. I did not know what to do or which way to go. Finally his paws hit me in my chest. Falling, I glimpsed warriors coming with spears, but they seemed to run in slow motion.

“As I slammed into the soil, dust rose as high as a termite mound. I felt numb and confused and terrified. I struggled to breathe and realized jaws had clamped around my throat. But I felt no pain.

“Time raced now. I heard warriors shout. Spears whizzed by my head. I saw quick flashes like lightening. And in the flashes were the faces of my father, my mother, my sisters and brothers. The face of Azizi came and went. I even saw Pendo grazing and swishing his brown, stumpy tail. Then it seemed like a black *shuka* covered my face, and I went to sleep. When I woke up, I was invisible.”

“I’m so sorry,” the woman says to my father. Her eyes are moist and unfocused. “Where is Makeeba buried?”

“Not buried,” my father says. His gaze wanders out across the bush and brings back the words he is looking for. “To bury hurts the ground. Great chiefs only are buried.” My father suddenly seems shrunken. As he walks away, the hem of his red plaid wrap kicks up in the breeze.

The woman turns to the guide for an explanation. He says, “The dead are put out or left out for the wild animals to eat. Makeeba died beneath the tree and was left there.”

The wood trembles in the hands of the woman the way