

Crooked Crown, Broken Wings

What Was...

High above in the sky, with the world blanketed by a fleece of snow, a dark shadow glided silently through the night air. A raven, but no mere raven by any means. Her eyes an unnatural gold and her purpose driven, the raven spread her wings as effortlessly as breathing, her motions smooth and precise. Winter's grip was firm and unyielding this year and as the raven flew over lakes encased in ice and trees weighed down by the chill of hoarfrost, her keeper sighed to see it through her eyes. Times were tough in winter and with tough times came death; young, old, strong, frail. Death cared not, only took.

And yet even in the darkest of moments, life, that fickle, fiendish thing, persisted. And humans did too. From her viewpoint on high, the raven could just make out the feasting scenes below, as tiny people lived their tiny lives. Watching through the raven's golden eyes was Urd, standing before the shimmering looking glass that let her see. See the love and joy and laughter that persisted despite the all-encompassing darkness that surrounded them. Despite the bite of the cold. The night which had seemed so oppressive to Urd was now broken by the hearths of a thousand fires. Little beacons of hope, burning bright.

The raven swooped down towards the closest hearth at Urd's bidding, and perched on the thatched straw roof of a longhouse. A gathering of some kind was happening, and all in the village were present; young, old, strong, frail. On the great steps of the King's longhouse stood the King himself, a robust man wearing fine furs. And by his side was a young boy, with a face that was kind and freckled. But it was his eyes that drew the raven in, for he had the eyes of someone who had seen more of the world than most others would see in a lifetime. Someone who knew how to see with the eyes of another. And the lute he had strapped on his back meant he could only be one thing; *a bard*.

Uninterested, the raven opened her wings to part but Urd's gentle voice gave her pause. "Stay," she whispered. "I would like to see this." And so, the raven watched.

*Within the gates | ere a man shall go,
Full long let him look about him;
For little he knows | where a foe may lurk,
And sit in the seats within ¹*

¹ 'Hovamol', *The Poetic Edda: The Mythological Poems*, trans. by Henry Adam Bellows, (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), pg. 33.

“Friends, family and loved ones!” A voice boomed loudly over the excited chatter of the crowd and startled many ravens into taking flight. Except one. The golden-eyed raven stayed still on her perch atop the thatched straw roof, watching. She watched curiously as the people gathered all fell silent, eyes turning towards the source of the disruption. The raven’s eyes followed theirs, allowing Urd to see too.

The King smiled happily at them all. “It gladdens my heart to see so many of us here tonight,” he began, the crowd listening with rapt attention. “Winter has always been a time of great hardship for our people. A time where death stalks the land like a pack of wolves. A time when the sun does not show its face for fear of what it might see. A time when we lose so many and become so few.” A sombre silence fell upon the crowd.

“But so too is winter a time when I see the best of our people shine through. Winter is when we come together, when we shoulder each others burdens and lighten our loads. It is when we feast and drink and sing so that we may feel connected, in love and warmth. And so much of it is possible because of one person.” The King turned to his right, where the Bard still stood. The Bard, for his part, did not react to this, save from a smile towards the crowd, but Urd could see the surprise in his eyes as clear as a cloudless sky.

“Bard,” the King said, as he beckoned the young man forward, and Urd watched the King’s hand clasp the Bard’s shoulder once they stood side-by-side. “I call you forward to thank you for all you have contributed, both to this feast and to our lives. A bard’s role is no simple feat. While I may govern our people, it is you who we have to thank for remembering our heritage and culture. You recite to us our history; you teach our children and you give us music so that we might be more connected to one another. You help us celebrate what we have and remember what we have lost. You remind us of where we came from and where we are going. And that is why I want to thank you for all you have done.” The King turned to his other side, accepting the wooden tankard being offered to him. He pressed one into the Bard’s hand, as the crowd turned to the servers and took a tankard as well. The King raised his flagon, the crowd following suit.

“A toast!” He called out. “To every song and epic that you have composed,” he said to the Bard. “And to a hundred more! May they never stop being sung!” The raven took flight as the crowd started to cheer and the Bard stepped forward to perform. She flew over the feasting people, all laughing, dancing, singing. The Bard performed and the King watched it all with a smile on his face. Urd smiled too. She started to weave this new reality, one that celebrated life and light and music. Yet when she tried to spin the thread, the needle caught, drawing blood from her finger.

And with a sinking heart, Urd knew this would not last.

*By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes*²

² William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Roma Gill, (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2009), Act 4, Scene 1, pg. 63.

What Is...

The golden-eyed raven flaps her wings over the vast city. Centuries have passed since Urd was her handler and now it is Verdandi who tends to her every whim and gazes at the world through her eyes. A world that is becoming more and more silent. It starts slowly, like most things do. There is no big sign saying 'THIS IS WHAT WE ARE DOING', not yet. Wars are waged and fought, won and lost. Empires rise and fall, inventions created. New eras are ushered in to the sound of innovation and the deep desperate human desire to push forward. Her raven watches it all with cool detachment but Verdandi cannot, *will not*, do the same. Her loom sits by her side, waiting.

*The sun turns black, | earth sinks in the sea,
The hot stars down | from heaven are whirled;
Fierce grows the steam | and the life-feeding flame,
Till fire leaps high | about heaven itself³*

She watches as new technology takes over the world, as science develops and strains to understand the universe and all that is in it, as humans save lives, and change everything she thought she once knew. She watches too, as kings change and become even more focused on what they can get rather than what they can give. She sees it with bards as well, the call to fame and the chance of the limelight. And slowly, but surely, the world becomes a very different place than what she has seen before.

*I saw for Baldr, | the bleeding god,
The son of Othin, | his destiny set⁴*

It continues quietly. The raven sees it happening all around her. Some redirected funding here and there. The creative commissions that don't pay nearly as well as they should. The shift from government subsidy to private sponsorship, often only given to elite art organisations. The new bard who puts down her lute to 'get a real job'. The Iron Lady who does not see people, only means of making profit. The raven sees and the raven watches. The raven watches but it is Verdandi who weeps.

³ 'Völuspá', *The Poetic Edda*, pg. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 23.

Do something, she begs the King, the Bard, anyone, as the raven watches on. *Do anything*. Silence is all the answer she gets.

*So, hold my hand,
Consign me not to darkness*⁵

“The problem with the beginning of the end,” Verdandi muses aloud to the raven, as humanity ushers in a new millennium, “Is that you very rarely ever see it coming. More often than not, you don’t even realise it’s there until it is already gone. Maddening, isn’t it?” The raven says nothing, only watches. Verdandi holds onto the hope that it will stop. That people will realise how much they need her Bard. That they will see why he is so important. She lets herself believe he will look at the world around him, one that no longer sees his value as a teacher, an advisor, an advocate for truth and expression. She hopes he will use his words, his *power*, to make it better, before it is too late. She doesn’t think it could possibly get worse but she forgets how fickle life really is. The raven watches as the virus kills and decimates and takes, takes, takes, and Death does not care, only takes, takes, *takes*. And Verdandi cannot do anything but watch through her raven’s golden eyes, as the world she loves so dearly begins to crumble. She watches as her bards are cast to the side, left to fend for themselves in a time when no one should have to be alone. She watches because it is all she can do.

*The pull on my flesh was just too strong
Stifled the choice and the air in my lungs
Better not
To breathe than to breathe a lie*⁶

Verdandi watches as the budget slashing for art just continues. STEM subjects are so important, after all, and no one can deny how much better they make life. The King is sure the Bard understands. The raven sees the moment the Bard hesitates. *Say the word and I can stop it*, Verdandi thinks a little desperately, a pit of dread forming in her stomach. *Say no*. He tries to speak but his words are drowned out by a King that does not care for music. And Verdandi wants to scream. *I can stop this*, she pleads, as the Bard struggles to speak, unaware of what is coming. *But not alone*. Silence is her only answer.

⁵ Mumford and Sons, ‘Broken Crown’, *Babel*, Track 10, Markus Dravs, Dew Process, 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXzDu071RdQ>> [accessed 18th April 2022].

⁶ *Ibid.*, [accessed 18th April 2022].

*So, crawl on my belly 'til the sun goes down,
I'll never wear your broken crown
I can take the road and I can fuck it all away
But in this twilight, how dare you speak of grace?⁷*

The raven watches as the Bard is pushed away, his words falling on deaf ears. She watches as he's told to make do with less and less, while the King takes, takes, *takes* and does not think to give. She watches as push comes to shove and the Bard decides that he will not go gentle into that good night.⁸ "If you think I'll stand by and let you do this, then—"

"Then what? What will you do, Bard? You'll scorn me? Vilify me? I have no need to fear your words anymore." Verdandi thinks him stupid. She remembers the days when a bard's voice was respected and feared.

The Bard is silent for a long moment, too long for Verdandi's liking. "Do you wish to get rid of me? Is that it?"

The King scoffs, frustrated. "What I wish is to never have to hear you ever again."

For just a moment, he forgets the power of a bard's words. A single, thoughtless moment of despair. But one moment is all that's needed to change everything. "Fine then," the raven hears the Bard whisper, vitriol thick on his tongue. "You'll have your wish, King. You will never see nor hear me ever again." He shrugs the lute from his back and throws it at the King's feet. The Bard leaves the King to his silence and the raven watches. And with a sad sigh, Verdandi starts to weave.

*Seal my heart and break my pride
I've nowhere to stand and now nowhere to hide
Align my heart, my body, my mind
To face what I've done and do my time⁹*

⁷ Ibid., [accessed 18th April 2022].

⁸ Dylan Thomas, 'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night', *Poets.org*, [n. d.]
<<https://poets.org/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night>> [accessed 22nd April 2022].

⁹ Mumford and Sons, 'Dust Bowl Dance', *Sigh No More*, Track 11, Markus Dravs, Universal Island Records Ltd., 2009, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ouj6k-rmaX0>> [accessed 14th April 2022].

Realisation does not come all at once. It is slow, gradual. Fewer people studying the humanities at university every year, an artist who becomes an accountant, the fantasy writer who goes into journalism instead. The number of people going to live theatre drops again and keeps dropping. And it doesn't stop. Institutions close, funding is redirected and slowly but surely, the only form of creative expression to be found is from swanky organisations, funded by private bodies. And even that starts to taper off. And the King doesn't notice, doesn't care to notice, not until years have passed since he last heard or saw something new.

But it was not your fault but mine

And it was your heart on the line

I really fucked it up this time

*Didn't I, my dear?*¹⁰

The raven watches as the King tries to undo what he has done; the promises of new funding, the reopening of old arts institutions. But people no longer care for art. It's not useful, they tell him, not like STEM, or economics, or politics. We just don't need it in a functioning society, they say. So the King goes to the Bard, but he cannot find him. He left this world and will not return.

"What have you done?!" The King screams at the empty room where he and the Bard once stood, side-by-side. He screams, blaming the Bard for all that has passed but the raven only looks on. "What have you done?" He says again, his voice little more than a whisper as he collapses to his knees. He weeps and the raven watches. And somewhere, realms away, Verdandi looks on with a tear-strained face.

"No." She whispers to him, even though he cannot hear. "What have *you* done?" Silence is her only answer and she has come to hate the sound of it.

*Didn't I, my dear?*¹¹

¹⁰ Mumford and Sons, 'Little Lion Man', *Sigh No More*, Track 7, Markus Dravs, Universal Island Records Ltd., 2009, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7bHe--mp1g>> [accessed 14th April 2022].

¹¹ Ibid., [accessed 14th April 2022].

What Is Yet To Be...

Centuries later, the raven will see a desolate landscape where the world once stood. She will watch a world that is colourless, joyless, devoid of creativity and freedom. She will listen and hear nothing but silence. Skuld will look through her eyes and see nothing of the realm her sisters had so loved. Instead, she will see a resurgence of Ginnungagap, the primordial void that predated the universe, only worse, because it will not be the absence of something but the presence of nothing.

*The sea, storm-driven, | seeks heaven itself,
O'er the earth it flows, | the air grows sterile;
Then follow the snows | and the furious winds,
For the gods are doomed, | and the end is death ¹²*

Skuld will watch through the raven's eyes as the King sits on his desolate throne. In his hands will be the lute the Bard had thrown to him so many years ago. It will be a damaged and mangled thing, incapable of being saved. Her loom will sit next to Skuld, the needle rusted and the thread weak. Not all that is broken can be fixed. The raven will long to leave that broken room with that broken lute and that broken man, trapped in a broken world.

But the raven will never fly again. Her wings were broken long ago.

But in this twilight, our choices seal our fate. ¹³

Word Count: 2593 (excluding footnotes).

¹² 'Hyndluljoth: The Poem of Hyndla', *The Poetic Edda*, pg. 159.

¹³ Mumford and Sons, 'Broken Crown', [accessed 18th April 2022].