

Old Raven by Stephen Brooke ©2021

# OLD RAVEN

*a poem in four cantos*



*Stephen Brooke*

# *Old Raven*

I.

Black as a cat, wise as an owl,  
Raven heard the werewolves howl.

Perched on my shoulder, spoke in my ear,  
*They hunt afar, you need not fear.*

On distant hills rose their tune;  
there the pack sang to the full moon.

They sang of the hunt, of blood running red;  
their howling rose wild, to wake the undead.



Round haunted tombs, where the ghouls sat  
gnawing their bones, flitted the bat.

In hollow places I heard its squeak;  
dark-filled spaces where I would seek

what I once lost when the moon waned.  
With its full rising can aught be regained?

Rose the werewolves' howls now clearer;  
quoth old Raven, *They draw nearer.*

Red as blood the moon now stands  
high above these misted lands,

and across the fog-wrapped moors  
I seek still my hidden doors.



On standing stones the runes lie graven,  
and none to read them but old Raven,

wiser than wise, blacker than night.  
With heavy wing he took to flight,

*I go, he croaked, to seek the unknown;*  
in silent darkness, I stood alone.



II.

Then rose the howling near at hand,  
the crossroads where the gibbets stand;

there a tattered highwayman hangs  
and round the gallows, the pack bares fangs.

He watches with unseeing eyes;  
in the dark his soul yet cries

to be released to what hell waits  
such doomed as he with grim black gates.



For what torment could be worse  
than dangling for the sake of a purse,

dangling stark against the sky  
to watch the living passing by?

Once a woman he loved came hither;  
now the things of nighttime slither

where they made impassioned tryst,  
where that one last time they kissed.

He fancied himself a robber bold;  
now he hangs forgotten, cold,

and she has taken another love.  
He hangs here; the moon hangs above.



III.

Then in the darkness, something stirred;  
now returned the old black bird

to where I lingered, drowned in thought.  
*Through the maze of night I've sought*

*lost temples where the tortured groaned,  
as the old ones sat enthroned—*

*gods whose names I dare not speak,*  
he rasped. I looked across the bleak,

moon-lit distances in vain;  
yet what course but to remain?



*Old Raven with your blackened wing,  
bird without a song, now sing!*

*Does hope live in the words you bear  
or am I ever to despair?*

*Night will not give way to dawn,  
said he. Those gone forever gone*

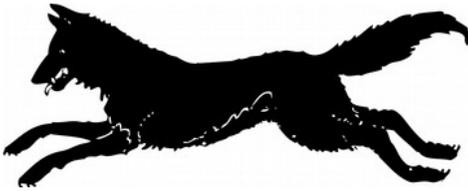
*must be, and nevermore return.  
There is no deeper lore to learn.*

*With my sodden heart I stood.  
Long it is since life seemed good;*

*Would that all its turmoil cease,  
I told the raven. I seek release.*

*I have but this herb to give  
for one who's lost his will to live;*

*take it and seek oblivion.  
Take it and with the werewolves run!*



IV.

Now the pack pads all around,  
gray as fog that clings the ground,

circling as I weary stand,  
Old Raven's drug yet in my hand.

To be rid of this mortal weight!  
To take in my two hands my fate!

I swallow down his bitter gift  
and to the blood-red moon I lift

my head, release my primal howl,  
echoed by the distant owl.



The moon stands high, I feel the change  
my form contorting, mind turned strange,

thirsting for the steaming blood,  
the quarry pulled down to the mud—

to lose the man, the beast attain,  
forgetting every human pain.

Dark as shadow in the night,  
wise Old Raven takes to flight.



This little poem is free for you to enjoy and, if you wish, share. Remember though, it is the copyrighted work of Stephen Brooke, and should not be altered nor copied without acknowledgment of his authorship.

Stephen Brooke has several collections of poetry available through the Eggshell Boats imprint of Arachis Press, as well as a number of novels and other prose work.

<http://archispress.com>