

THE BURDEN OF GRAVITY

poems

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CAITLIN PRESS

## **Stones**

1958

The last body covered,  
patted with shovels, the final  
gravestone, placed.  
All those who came after,  
unclaimed, transported to the university.  
Cadavers.

1977

The hospital board claimed  
the sick and elderly didn't  
want to see—  
rows of death markers  
from their windows, their future.

Eighteen hundred gravestones  
relocated into the city.

Staff used some stones to build  
a retaining wall behind the school.  
Autumn rains seeped into  
the soil, dislodging  
the slabs, tumbling them  
into the creek, submerged.

1986

Playing in her front yard, a young girl pulled  
loose one of the stones from the pathway.  
She wiped the dirt off,  
perplexed by the letters and numbers.  
Her father dug out a hundred  
more from their driveway.

Visitors discover the patio  
behind the school, where staff gathered  
for barbecues, was a puzzle  
of levelled stones, forced pieces,  
some face up.

1999

Five hundred stones recovered.  
Every chunk and fragment rescued  
regardless of size, shape or integrity.

While preparing to convert  
the cemetery to a memorial garden  
nine stones are discovered,  
forgotten in the purge,  
left concealed in the solitude  
of fallen tree branches, overgrown  
grass and moss.

2007

Survivors gather at the garden,  
sombre, despite the steady squeal  
of power tools, condos rising across the street.

They congregate, hands gripping  
tissues, walking through the park.  
They pause, read each name  
on the rows and rows and rows  
of inset stones and plaques.

Wedged between the rows,  
an eight-foot block of granite.  
Its eerie black surface, buffed  
of imperfections, holds their gaze, aged  
reflections. Below it, sunken  
into the dirt, one new stone, inscribed:  
*respect.*

## **Cathode Rays**

Alone in the ward two boys lie  
in their beds, limbs constricted against  
their bodies like twisted tree branches.

They let their eyes relax, watch  
the scattered black and white  
patterns and shapes form  
and fade into hockey rinks  
and muscle cars and backyard fires  
and playground swings and shooting stars  
and ice cream sundaes and sidewalk chalk drawings  
and loosened knots in twisted branches.

Across the room  
white noise hisses  
from the small  
television set.

## Circles

He walks laps for hours.  
His tattered sneakers have  
worn a circle into the grass.

Children gather to watch  
his hunched shoulders,  
strained neck and arms'  
rhythmic sway.

Soft words jumble on his tongue  
as children try to block his path.  
He passes them on the inside,  
returning to his track  
unfazed.

The children whisper  
about the boy  
whose parents chained  
him to a tree, still unable  
to stop the spinning.

**Name:** Paul [REDACTED]

**Age:** Fifteen

**Gender:** Male

**Diagnosis:** [REDACTED]

**Medication:** [REDACTED]

**Ward Occurrences:**

The swaying branches  
temporary eclipse the sun  
a cool brushing over pale skin  
not felt through pane.

## **The Burden of Gravity**

From behind the pane  
of his ward, Paul watches  
a colony of seagulls glide  
up from the Fraser. Their mocking  
scatters. Paul longs  
to detach from the burden  
of gravity, hollow his bones,  
sprout dark feathers all over  
his smooth adolescent skin.  
He's eager to join  
the other birds on the green  
sun-bleached shingles outside  
his window; silent  
and crouching between  
folded wings, waiting  
for freedom's lifting breath.

## Headstones

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] decades, [REDACTED] concrete [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] wooden block letters — [REDACTED] buried or ripped out [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] few [REDACTED] signs [REDACTED] remain. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] former residents [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
the cemetery [REDACTED] citizens [REDACTED] lie silently [REDACTED] grassy  
[REDACTED]  
knolls. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] the garden [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] living survivors [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
those who didn't [REDACTED] wait their turn. [REDACTED]



[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Woodlands [REDACTED]  
casualty list [REDACTED] 3,081 [REDACTED] buried  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] in the woods, surrounding [REDACTED] stone [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
housed them. [REDACTED] patients [REDACTED] died [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] dumped there. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

## Friends Who Didn't

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] thick grove of maples, [REDACTED] tardy summer sun, [REDACTED] survived  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] wept, [REDACTED] the friends who didn't.