

# The Corrosion

Christopher Hivner

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Dedication

*to the fault lines*

## The First Star She Sees

Rosalee saw the stars every night  
while smoking her last cigarette  
after turning her last trick  
to make \$50 to pay the rent.  
Rosalee saw the stars every night  
as they inched across the sky.



## The Back Room, 3:23 a.m.

Three aces  
stared back at him.  
Two were face down,  
looking up through the gauze  
of red cherubs and fleur-de-lis.  
The third lay up on the table,  
winking,  
the way a good hand does,  
enticing you to bet.  
But he played it cool,  
saw the current money, no raise.  
He needed the fourth ace,  
then he would raise and raise big,  
and win,  
for the first time in a long time.  
“You hear that, Trish?”  
he gloated silently to his ex-wife.  
The Loser is going to win,  
the Loser is going to take a chance  
for once.  
The Loser . . . got an eight.  
It’s ok,  
one more down card to come,  
just see the bet, stay in the game.  
“That’s right, Patricia,  
I’m in the game.”  
The Loser’s in the game.  
Poker face firmly in place,  
courage tucked away in reserve.  
Here comes the ace of diamonds.  
Oh, isn’t it beautiful,  
glowing red,  
like the center of a flame.  
“I never bought you a real diamond”  
he thinks softly to his ex,

but you're buying me one.  
He raises the bet,  
alimony money into the center of the table.  
Three players drop out.  
Showdown.  
Another raise.  
No new clothes, Trish,  
next month's alimony into the pot.  
He turns his cards over,  
one at a time, trying not to smile.  
One ace after another, set up in a row  
like ducks at a shooting gallery.  
He stares lustily at  
the mound of money on the table  
but his head is pierced  
by Patricia's shrill laughter and his eyes  
are drawn to  
the other player's cards.  
He blinks, but they don't change,  
straight flush.  
"But that's not possible"  
he mews openly  
as his money is swept away  
by two hard, raw forearms.  
and his aces  
wink at him.

## This Time

He waited.  
One more sterile room,  
one more chance  
at either redemption  
or a fourth opinion  
the same as the first.  
He waited,  
vulnerable to the  
homogenized air,  
weak to the  
betrayal of his body.  
The skinned figures  
on charts  
stared back at him  
with an accusing glare,  
who is this interloper  
into our world,  
they whispered in strained voices  
while the fabric  
of the teal-green gown  
kissed him all over  
like his wife used to  
before he became too fragile,  
a porcelain doll  
with a beard  
and no appetite.

This time the news  
will be good  
he mumbled into the ether,  
a soft nod  
as back up confirmation.  
This time the news  
will be different  
he tried to convince  
the living man and woman  
on the wall,  
but they looked away  
like old friends  
who didn't know what to say.  
This time, he thought  
it has to be different.



## Thinking of Her Just One More Time Before the Lights Go Out

In the dream  
it isn't a dream.  
In the dream  
she doesn't get high.  
In the dimming light  
there is a way out  
and no more layers  
to dig for.  
But then that's why

I'm in the dream,  
having the dream,  
needing the dream.

Cracks in the strata,  
movements in the plates  
splitting along the fault line.  
The mouth of hell stretching wide  
to include me,  
unhinging its jaw  
for a little extra darkness,  
and I'm feeling kiln-hardened,  
no longer shy about the heat on my cheek  
or the spot on the wall  
that used to be mine.

I tried to wake up  
in an amber-preserved moment,  
but now I prefer the dream  
because in it,  
she doesn't get high.

## North Carolina

The wind blew  
with lust  
atop the dune,  
pelting our skin  
with stings of sand  
although I don't think  
she noticed,  
sitting with her knees  
pressed to her chest,  
her eyes thinking  
"If I hug tightly enough  
I'll be somewhere else."

I sat beside her  
bored,  
having explored the dune  
for what it was worth.  
The sun heated my face,  
sand got in my eyes  
and mouth  
while I wondered,  
how did I  
become invisible?

I sat next to her,  
with her,  
a shadow  
without form  
or substance  
yet I could feel  
myself breathing.  
I was thirsty  
and wanted a soda,  
words came out  
of my mouth:

inquiries, pleas,  
jokes, nonsense,  
it didn't matter.  
I was already  
a ghost.

It would be some time,  
years in fact,  
until we were separate.  
There were talks,  
arguments, tears,  
stretches for understanding,  
bitterness replaced by acceptance  
replaced by bitterness.  
Eventually there were people to talk to,  
papers to sign  
and lives to get on with.

I wore confusion  
like a hat  
for awhile  
and never saw it  
until years had passed,  
when clarity suddenly  
became easy.  
For all the moments  
that are my past,  
my life changed  
on a sand dune  
in North Carolina  
when I became  
a ghost.

## A Lightning Strike

He walked out from under  
a billboard for  
a local radio station  
who wanted him to know  
they were Pennsylvania's home for classic rock.  
He stepped onto the outskirts of town  
with no purpose  
and \$38 in his pocket.  
He had shaved his head  
the night before  
in a truck stop diner's bathroom  
and now as  
it began to rain,  
he felt the pat-pat-pat  
of the fat drops on his scalp.  
It would be daylight  
in a few hours and he wanted  
to be in a bed before then.  
Entering a development,  
he loped through yards  
avoiding porch and street lights.  
A rancher at an intersection  
was lit up, a form  
passing through the kitchen.  
Kneeling behind a shed  
he watched the house go black  
and a man emerge  
moments later,  
striding purposefully to his car.

The constellations and he  
had become friendly  
during his lost nights.  
Orion didn't approve  
of his lifestyle  
but wouldn't condemn him  
while Cassiopeia tutted  
like his mother.  
They told each other stories  
with no endings,  
dangling as blandishments  
on each other's necks.  
He was just glad to have some friends  
that were always there.

He was prepared to pick the lock,  
but the door was open.  
He took a moment to adjust  
to the house's version of darkness  
and then walked through the rooms.  
Bare white walls  
framed electronics  
and small chairs. The leaf  
of a plastic plant  
brushed his arm.  
On a shelf next to ancient trophies,  
he found a photo  
of a man and a woman,  
arms wrapped tightly around each other,  
rosy cheeks pressed together.

The rain became a thunderstorm  
as he discovered the bedroom.  
A lightning strike  
brightened the room  
illuminating the woman's form  
lying on the bed. He froze,  
swearing at his miscalculation.  
Before he could back away,  
a series of flashes  
and he could see she had turned  
to look at him.  
In the ephemeral  
he saw a soft face bloomed  
with tears.

"Who are you?" she asked,  
her voice barely beating out  
the thunder  
for attention.  
She turned away and in a lull  
of the storm, he heard,  
"doesn't matter."

Then she stretched her arm behind her  
and opened her hand.  
Exhaustion led him  
to lie down in the bed  
like an obedient dog.  
He put his hand in hers  
and she pulled him close,  
wrapping his arm  
around her stomach.  
She sobbed,  
her body rocking gently.  
His fingers entwining with hers  
was all the sympathy  
he could offer.

## Mama Kisses Daddy

and then the car pulled to the curb,  
(just keep driving, please)  
the power window lowering  
(don't look at me, pick someone else)  
to reveal a well-dressed man  
(married, they all are)  
in his 50's, motioning.  
(he wants me)  
The deal is struck  
(guess I eat tonight)  
and the car drives to a deserted lot.  
(home again, home again, jiggity jig)  
Money is exchanged  
(if only I got it all)

and then the dream begins  
even before she closes her eyes and starts.

Mama stands in the yard  
watching daddy pull into the driveway.  
Little girl hangs on Mama's dress.  
Thin cotton material  
sliding coolly between her tiny fingers,  
feeling like the underside of her pillow at night.  
Her head falls against Mama's thigh,  
dimming sunlight covering her face like a mask.  
Little girl waves to a passing friend  
as she is enveloped by Daddy's shadow.  
Daddy kisses Mama,  
large, strong hands resting gracefully on her hips.



Little girl stands in the darkness,  
collecting the warmth from their bodies,  
looking up when her name is spoken  
and trying to grow taller  
as Daddy's hand reaches down  
to stroke her hair  
and brush it like a cat's whisker over her skin.  
The hand slips behind her head

and holds her in place  
while she chokes.  
(can't breathe)  
The well-dressed man  
(go home to your wife)  
won't let go even as she scratches his face.  
(draw blood)  
Finally he finishes and relaxes  
(oh my God, help me)  
and makes no move to stop her  
(get out get out get out get out)  
when she runs from the car

into the nightmare  
that dances inside her skull.

Riding in the backseat,  
Daddy looking at Mama and smiling.  
Mama turning to daddy,  
screaming,  
and then the crash,  
spinning, spinning, spinning.  
Little girl's head cracks the window,  
Mama wailing, Daddy gone,  
another crash and the car stops.

The air is silent,  
wrapping its uncaring arms  
around the girl,  
descending on her through the roof  
that isn't there anymore.  
She listens for Mama and Daddy,  
waits for one of them to pick her up.  
She calls to them and listens,  
shrieks their names, sobbing through the blood,  
begs them to hold her,  
reaches for Mama's dress, Daddy's hand

her apartment door  
and falls inside, crumbling to the floor.  
Vomiting up the evenings flavors,  
searching for tears that can't come  
because the well is dry,  
as dead and cold  
as the grave she should be buried in  
(how did I survive)  
with her parents.  
(why did I survive)  
The little girl curled up on the floor  
(want to sleep)  
burying her face inside her arms,  
creating a cocoon.  
(go to sleep, stop thinking)  
She tries to love the darkness  
(my only lover)  
and forget.

# I am Haunted by Dreams

I am haunted  
by dreams of the woman  
I should have loved.

I am haunted  
by the thought  
that she is still waiting for me

because I don't know  
who she is  
and why we have not met.

The smoke from my fire  
tears my eyes  
so I can cry

to lament  
my wounding  
of the woman I should love.

I am haunted  
by her sobs of grief  
for children she did not have.

I am haunted  
by memories  
I did not create.

Where has she been  
while I was in my field  
hidden by the stalks?

Where was I  
while she prepared our bed  
with new sheets?

I am haunted  
by dreams of conversations  
with a voice

as textured as woven cloth  
and filled with the wonder  
of an ordinary day.

I am angry at fate  
for keeping us apart,  
locking me away out of sight

of her star  
as it passed slowly overhead  
each lonely night.

I am haunted  
by dreams of the woman  
I could have loved.

## The Voice of Sleep

“Wake up Frankie  
and tell me a story.  
The one that doesn’t end here  
where we are.”

The voice emanates  
from beneath my window  
spiraling through pale street light  
like smoke  
chasing its tail.  
Summer heat  
pumps through my insomniac veins  
while I stare  
at visions of cool blue water  
on my ceiling.  
The fan on the floor  
oscillates too slowly  
to save me from melting,  
while the world outside  
burns to a crisp.

“Talk to me Frankie,  
I can’t sleep  
without you telling me  
you love me.”

I wait  
for Frankie’s voice  
like every night,  
dusting fairy tales to his girl  
with the rhythm  
of Muddy Waters,  
making it okay  
to be alive.

Stories of  
high rise buildings  
draped in silk  
and touching the clouds,  
where the lovely people  
create the meaning  
we all  
strive for.

“Frankie,  
why are you doing this to me?  
Baby,  
you have to wake up.”

4:00 a.m. and I pass each other  
in the throes of drowning,  
reaching a hand out  
like throwing change  
at a busker.  
Where is the story  
in the sweat of death?  
Frankie’s voice  
is gone.  
His girl won’t cry,  
so she begins  
to sing,  
a howl of desire  
to make the wolf proud.

I drop off to sleep  
as the sun rises  
over the streets.

## Meanwhile, Over on 5<sup>th</sup> Street

He was a man  
after all,  
and he had  
his pride,  
which she didn't understand.  
She had actually  
said no  
to her husband,  
the man of the house,  
the hammer of God.  
It wasn't a request,  
she was going  
to her knees  
one way or the other.

He was a man  
after all.  
Her man.  
The man.  
The beer went down  
so smooth  
when salted  
with righteousness.  
She brought him the beer  
because  
she knew her duty,  
but then  
she said no.

Her skin  
was still under his nails  
from last time.



He left it there  
as a reminder  
for both of them,  
but this time  
she had ignored it.  
Her eyes  
hadn't darted down  
to his clenched hands.  
She didn't whisper "please, not now"  
while slipping out  
her usual tears.  
She hadn't done any of those things.

He was a man,  
after all,  
and a man  
can be taken down  
through many means  
including a  
claw hammer  
struck to the temple.  
He lay  
on the oval shaped  
living room rug.  
The top of  
his sweaty work jeans  
hanging open  
and a beer can  
still balanced on his fingers.  
Meanwhile,  
over on 5th street  
it was quiet  
as evening closed in.

## The Storm

It always smells like rain  
when she leaves  
and the house goes quiet,  
too lonely to make a sound.  
He stands on the porch too long  
after waving goodbye,  
laughing with the avatar  
riding her bike up and down the side walk.  
He marks the calendar  
indicating his daughter's return.  
He lives for that mark,  
breathes, eats and sleeps  
just to get to that mark  
because it smells like rain  
when she leaves.

## The Boy and the Girl

The boy and the girl  
in the throes of passion?  
No. Passion implies love,  
this was grinding, rutting,  
doing it like the plane was going down.  
She was moaning and  
he wished she would shut up  
so he could concentrate on coming.  
She wanted it to last  
but didn't have the time either.  
Mom and dad would be home soon and  
they would need the couch  
for watching TV and arguing.

He was done,  
body sweaty and still convulsing, like a snake feeding.  
She wanted to close her legs, she  
suddenly felt strange,  
like a receptacle.  
His clothes were half-way back on already.  
She tried to pull her panties up around him  
as he leaned in to kiss her breast as a goodbye.

The boy and the girl.  
He stands in his bathroom,  
doing himself  
to cool down before bed.  
She lies on her bedroom floor  
staring at the ceiling  
trying to remember what he looked like.

## The Corrosion

He sat in a rocker,  
perfectly still,  
stealing the chair's usefulness from it.  
She lay on the couch  
across the room,  
an ocean ebbing and flowing between them,  
the waves of her infidelities  
slapped his face,  
burning his eyes with salt,  
but he would not allow tears  
to fall.

She rested on her island,  
ease in her deceit,  
sleeping the sleep  
of a fallen angel.  
Water laps at her feet,  
glistening off of silver flesh.  
Lovers leap from white-capped swells  
planting briny kisses  
to her excited breasts.

Shark's teeth float  
in a lost chest  
of Blackbeard's gold,  
washing up to the husband's feet.  
And the nymph laughed,  
until he cleaned each doubloon  
with saliva  
from deep in his throat.  
She felt each spit  
like acid on her skin,  
rubbing away the corrosion.

Sliding from her perch  
into the water  
she swims away,  
against the current  
while her husband counts his gold.  
Like leeches  
the lovers suckle to her,  
dragging her down,  
filling the water with blood.  
Her screams  
gurgle through the waves  
to her husband  
who rocks in his chair  
waiting for the tide to come in.

## If the World Ended Tonight

They walked hand in hand  
through ankle-deep fall leaves.  
The shuffling and crunching  
covered their words so neither heard  
how unhappy the other was  
but could feel it in the loose grip of their hands  
and uncaring stares straight ahead.

So his mind drifted  
to the money he had in a secret bank account  
and what he would do with it  
when the day came  
when she said the wrong thing  
and he could twist it  
to leave with a purpose.  
He wanted to be the sympathetic one,  
didn't want to openly hurt her,  
just wanted out.

They were on a path now,  
stones and dirt grinding beneath their feet.  
He could hear her, if she spoke,  
but the silence stretched between them,  
a rope over a chasm.

So she slipped away  
to be with her lover  
as she was last night.  
She could still smell him on her skin  
and wondered if her husband could as well.  
She could still feel him between her legs  
and pondered if, during their sex this morning,  
her husband felt him too.

They approached the car, a prison bus,  
to take them back to lockdown.  
He opens the door for his wife.  
She thanks him with a kiss and a smile.  
He walks to the driver side  
with hope of another slam in bed  
when they get home.



## Snakes

There would be no crying,  
she had decided,  
the weight of unexplored tears  
ballooning behind her eyes.  
He stood there so calm  
apologizing, explaining, even smiling  
in his thousand dollar suit.  
His eyes tasted her  
in the red lace he had bought.  
Another apology,  
as sincere as rain in the desert.  
He crawled on his belly  
to kiss her feet with razors  
and yet she still wanted to bleed for him.  
Maria tugged at her teddy,  
trying to lengthen it  
to keep him from slithering between her legs  
as he kept talking,  
softer and sweeter.  
There wasn't going to be any crying  
she determined, swallowing the salt in her throat,  
raising her head  
to watch him walk out the door.

## Jazz at Midnight

The road at 1 a.m.  
was only a traffic light  
giving out instructions  
like a good soldier  
even when no one was around to obey them.  
He watched from the window,  
a guest in his own life.  
Music played a few rooms away,  
the jazz that she likes.  
He likes it too  
if she says he should.  
A car finally drives up the road  
and keeps going past his house.  
His hands slide back down the window  
through a cloud his breath left behind.  
A wailing saxophone breached his thoughts.  
God, how he hated this song,  
or loved it,  
depending.

## The Girl Who Would Be A Woman

She cast out a net  
to catch all the children who laughed  
and left her on the beach  
in her sandals and shorts.

Brown water burst from the pipe  
flooding the five and ten  
and they blamed her  
even though she hadn't been invited.

Treasures mounted on a wall  
leading to a corner  
and she can't find all the trophies  
that she never won.

But how they struggled in the net,  
not quite begging though  
like she had  
before daddy's hand struck.

Dogs are pests and children should be quiet  
and mothers need to sleep and toys are expensive  
and daddy will come back and no means no  
and shut up means no and stop talking.

They didn't know where she had gone  
because you can't see princesses  
when they order your eyes shut  
until the moon reappears.

The net held them all,  
the net cut into their skin,  
the net made them bleed,  
the net was a dream.

The closet stored clothes and shoes,  
and memories and corpses  
that looked like her  
and spoke of eating candy and skipping rope.

The first kiss from a boy  
was actually a man  
with his hands in her panties  
and she cried until the serpents crawled home.

The net was cast  
and caught them all.  
She left them to rot in the hot sun,  
she left them to rot from the inside out.

## Out of Love

The voice is muted in her head,  
she's turned the volume off.  
She watches the veins throb,  
middle of his forehead,  
spittle flies from  
fleshy, feminine lips  
and hits her on the neck  
like a wet kiss,  
the kind her boyfriend  
gives her  
while slamming her  
from behind.  
Her father's finger  
wags closer and closer  
to her nose  
and her face tightens,  
waiting for the  
inevitable smack.  
She drifts off  
dreaming of doing something nice  
for her man.  
A vision forms  
and she smiles just enough.  
That earns her  
an open handed crack  
across her jaw.

“What are you smilin’ at?”  
The remote’s been broken,  
the volume is back up.  
Father’s corpulent frame stands erect,  
his hands fidgeting around his pants,  
she thought for a moment  
the belt was coming off,  
that could mean any number  
of very bad things,  
but instead he goes quiet.  
“No 15-year-old is going to fool me,”  
and then he’s gone,  
getting soft in his dotage  
she guesses.  
She’s not even bleeding.  
It’s time to go,  
boyfriend is waiting.  
He’ll make it all better.  
When he hits her  
it’s out of love.

## The Perpetual Motion Machine

Lying rigid,  
the good wife,  
she waited  
for him to finish  
and roll off.  
He starts to  
smack her ass  
as he plows through her  
like a train  
late for the station.  
She looks into his  
cold, dead eyes,  
black diamond mirrors.  
She looked old,  
too old to still have  
her legs in the air  
for him.  
But who is she then,  
if not his wife?  
Not a mother,  
no children.  
She never liked being  
a sister or daughter,  
not in her family.  
He grunted.  
The smacks were harder,  
her skin felt hot.

Was it still her skin  
or was it his now?  
She tried to protest  
but he didn't hear  
or didn't care.  
His hands moved over her breasts  
pinching and pawing.  
She was getting tired,  
why did it always  
have to hurt?  
He finally came,  
unloading sloppily  
inside of her  
and over her thigh.  
His eyes shined  
shaking hands  
with his smile,  
a reptilian circle.  
She lay still,  
waiting for him to get off  
but he just stared at her,  
as though he knew  
what she  
had been thinking.



## The Family Requiem

Falling out  
from under  
and into  
over through.  
The only chance  
we stand  
is from our  
own demise.

\*\*\*

I  
Mother comes home  
from shopping,  
a pharmaceutical smile  
and clothes  
that don't fit her.  
Junior disapproves  
but isn't bold enough  
to form the words  
with a tongue so young.

Dinner's on  
all fried, steamed and creamed.  
The kids dig in  
while mommy waits  
in the bathroom  
for daddy  
to come home.  
From his perch  
Junior eyes the door.

II  
Even  
eventually  
there's only so much  
he can take,  
a father's son,  
a man's man,  
where does perfection  
come from  
and when  
does it end?

III  
Daddy's home,  
a parade for  
the hero,  
the King!  
the King!  
Daughter at his feet,  
but the Prince  
fades to black.

IV  
The fabled end  
is near.

V  
Mother puts dinner  
on the table  
for the man  
she loves.  
His musk  
nauseates her  
mixed so sweetly  
with others.

Small talk, small talk,  
where have you been?  
Small talk,  
small talk,  
The children are starting  
to ask questions.  
Small talk,  
save your lies  
for them.  
Speak fast  
while they still believe in you.

VI  
The King proclaims  
all is well  
in his kingdom.  
Go to bed  
prince and princess,  
dream of  
your desires.

VII  
The fable  
ends here.

VIII

Screaming  
heard through  
thin walls,  
the Prince tries to sleep  
while  
the Princess cries.  
This is their  
lullaby.  
Rock-a-bye baby  
in the treetop,  
when the wind blows  
the King  
takes his crown  
by force.

\* \* \*

Falling out  
from under  
and into  
over through.  
The only chance  
we stand  
is from our  
own demise.

## Lucky Dog

Worried the dog  
might dig up his past,  
he built a fence  
to keep him from the yard.  
When the dog  
dug under the fence  
and unearthed secrets,  
he buried electrified sensors.  
So the dog jumped  
over the fence  
and scratched the surface of lies.  
Concerned about the skeletons,  
he dug them up himself  
and served them to the dog  
as treats.

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# The Corrosion

Christopher  
Hivner

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