

THE SHELF

SIX

# Edgar Allan Poe short stories to haunt your spooky season



**Ah, spooky season! That magical time of year when skeletons become acceptable home décor, and the desire to be thoroughly creeped out is at an all-time high. If you want to add a little gothic dread to your October nights, there's no better company than our resident Master of the Macabre—Edgar Allan Poe. Here are six of his most thrilling short stories, perfect for reading under a blanket while occasionally glancing nervously at the shadows creeping along your walls (I'm sure it's just a tree branch).**

SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

**The Tell-Tale Heart**

Feeling guilty about something? After reading this story, you might think you feel guilty, but you'll never be quite sure if it's guilt or if your heart is just going to explode from sheer terror. A classic tale of paranoia, Poe delivers a protagonist so unreliable, he makes your one friend who insists they've seen Bigfoot seem grounded in reality. You'll be questioning your own sanity right alongside him as he explains why killing an old man wasn't a big deal... But that eye—oh, that eye!

**Spook level:** Perfect if you like feeling unnerved and suddenly, vividly aware of your heartbeat.

**The Fall of the House of Usher**

If you've ever walked past a dilapidated old mansion and thought, "I wonder what horrifying secrets are hidden in there", then this one's for you. *The Fall of the House of Usher* isn't just creepy, it's practically the VIP lounge of haunted houses. As our poor narrator visits the doomed Roderick Usher, he finds that things inside the house are not quite... right. The walls seem to listen, the atmosphere feels oppressively weird, and the whole place seems ready to collapse under the weight of its family secrets. Bonus: there's a sentient house (kind of?), a crypt, and a lady who may or may not be dead. What more could October possibly ask for?

**Spook level:** Great for when you want to feel better about your own home repairs.

**The Black Cat**

Do you like cats? You might reconsider after reading this. In *The Black Cat*, Poe combines

animal cruelty, madness, and supernatural vengeance into a story that's as unsettling as it is memorable. Our narrator claims he loves animals, but between you and me, he's no friend of our fur-babies. After a night of heavy drinking, things get a little out of hand, and before you know it, his once-beloved black cat is missing an eye. Things only go downhill from there (and for the record, no, the cat doesn't forgive and forget). This story will leave you side-eyeing your own feline companion and wondering if they've got a supernatural score to settle.

**Spook level:** Ideal for cat lovers... if you're ready to sleep with one eye open.

**The Masque of the Red Death**

Ah, a lovely masquerade ball. What could possibly go wrong? Oh, you know, just a little thing called a plague. In this story, Prince Prospero throws the party of the century,

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

complete with masks, gowns, and the feeling of certain impending doom. Despite a terrifying disease ravaging the land, Prospero and his rich friends lock themselves away to avoid it and dance the night away. But when a mysterious figure shows up uninvited, things get... bad. (Spoiler: The Red Death doesn't need an invitation.) This is the perfect read for those who like their horror with a dash of the ironic—because in Poe's world, not even wealth can save you from your fate. Or a mysterious party-crasher.

**Spook level:** For anyone who's ever been afraid of party etiquette or airborne contagions. Remember COVID?

**The Cask of Amontillado**

If you've ever had a grudge against someone that lasted a little too long, this one might hit close to home. Montresor, our lovely narrator, has been wronged by Fortunato and decides that the best way to get back at him is... well, something much worse than unfollowing him on Instagram. With a masterfully subtle touch, Montresor lures Fortunato into the catacombs with the promise of some fine wine, because what's more tempting than an irresistible vintage? Let's just say, you'll never look at a wall the same way again. By the end of this, you might be questioning your friendships. Are your pals secretly plotting revenge—or are you just being dramatic?

**Spook level:** Best read with a glass of wine—just make sure you're not in a cellar.

**The Pit and the Pendulum**

Ever feel like life is just one endless series of impossible decisions? Well, our protagonist knows that feeling all too well. In this harrowing tale, he wakes up to find himself in the worst escape room imaginable: a dungeon equipped with a pendulum that swings lower and lower with each passing moment. And if that weren't enough, there's a pit in the middle of the room ready to swallow him whole. No pressure, though! It's a nail-biter of a story that'll have you cheering for every moment of survival... while also seriously regretting that second cup of coffee.

**Spook level:** Ideal for anyone who wants to feel both claustrophobic and existentially threatened. Happy haunting!

*Sarazeen Saif Ahana is an adjunct member of the faculty at Independent University, Bangladesh where she teaches English and encourages her colleagues to haunt students who don't submit their work on time.*

## Nawab Faizunnesa was here

REFLECTIONS

submission. She says:

*I know I should not blame you.  
It is not you; it's in man's nature.  
When he attains one woman, he desires another.  
[...]  
The fault is mine; It's my own doing.  
I should have thought about this when I had time. It's but my destiny to suffer.  
Do what you please. I care no more.*

In Cumilla, we eat rasmalai for lunch, dinner, and breakfast. At night as a storm blows in from the bay, there are 30-second

screens now.

At Nawab Faizunnesa's city home, only the outer veranda is accessible and the spirit of abandonment reigns. Through the ground floor windows, we peek into the rooms: red-oxide floors, split-painted walls, damp spots in full bloom. A rocking chair in one. In another, a giant chest, strewn with empty ring-binders, velcro game paddles, an old calculator. The third room is arranged for an audience—a setting for a reading or an announcement, long given. Old photographs on the walls: the family assembled in front of the house,

Was it to this address that in 1889, Queen Victoria sent Faizunnesa Chaudhurani a long-awaited letter with the title and insignia of Nawab? This was no vanity title for Faizunnesa, it was a much needed symbol to navigate the world of regional land administration. Long before Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Faizunnesa set up a secondary girls school and clinics for women. She built roads. She dealt with feuding neighbours, land grabbers, paddy thieves, tigers, the British, her teenage daughter, all the while nursing her broken heart—

*Light Three Lined Verse:  
I took this pen to ease my pain  
I want my readers to know,  
How the happy life of Srimoti Faizun  
Became a tale of sorrow.*

Faizunnesa died in 1903, long before the partition, the great wars, famine, and the fall of the British Raj. But she still persists and transcends—her fairy tale, like all fairy tales, is a warning and an instruction: do not accumulate regret by wasting youth, do not compromise your faith, do not agree to things your heart does not want—a chosen emptiness is better than a forced companionship.

I did find Faizunnesa in Cumilla. She was in the air.

There was a fourth ghost story: the one about a broken heart that kept singing in a chorus, long after it was dead.

*Rupjalal* was first published from the Munshi Moulana box printers, Dhaka in 1876. It went out of print and was forgotten, until in 1976, when the Bangla Academy reprinted a centenary edition of the book. The Leiden English edition of *Rupjalal*, translated by Fayeza S. Hasanat, is available at the Sister Library.

*Katerina Don is the curator of HerStory Foundation and together with Shoma Sharmin and Zaima Hamid Zoa hosts Sister Library Dhaka.*

KATERINA DON

The Dhaka-Cumilla bus tickets are Tk 250 for non-AC, Tk 350 for AC, and Tk 400 for AC VIP. Window seats must be negotiated on the spot. The journey takes three to six hours, past the old capital of Sonargaon, where the moisture in the air inspired the muslin, across the Gomati river and into Cumilla town on the Tropic of Cancer.

In 1834, the year of Faizunnesa Chaudhurani's birth, this journey would have taken up to two days in a palanquin. That same year, teenager Ghaziuddin Haider, the last of the naib nazims, came to power. He much preferred playing with kites to governance and in his 10 years of rule, Ghaziuddin did little and spent a lot. With his death in 1943, the position of nazim came to an end, and with Queen Victoria's blessing, the nawabs returned to power in Bengal. That same year, Faizunnesa refused the first marriage proposal from her distant cousin, Muhammad Gazi. It was not until much later that, at the age of 23, she finally said yes.

But no, this is not a story about the power of persistence, and it does not end well.

It is September 2024 when we visit Cumilla. We cruise the city in three-row limo chargers, past dighis, temples, mosques, and viharas, engaged in perhaps

the only permissible type of stalking—that of the deceased. Everywhere, I look for Faizunnesa. Like a hopeless romantic, I ask of the roads, the trees, the bricks—*Did you know her?*

It is easy to imagine Faizunnesa wandering the thousand-year-old ruins of Shalban Vihara and Itakhola Mura, drawing from them the inspiration for her *Rupjalal* (1876), the kaleidoscopic fairy tale of the adventures of Jalal, the failable prince, who keeps forgetting his magic mantras and delaying the rescue of his damsel, Rup. The novel was first published in 1876, when Faizunnesa was 42 and her marriage had collapsed after Gazi chose to return to his other wife. Her language about heartbreak is snarky. Her disappointment and disdain are expressed with great wit; in verse and prose, she ridicules the "heroic" narcissism of Prince Jalal for over two hundred pages.

Jalal is Gazi, and Gazi is Jalal. In his journey to save his damsel, the prince accidentally gets married to another woman. He still loves Rup truly, which means that she must accept his predicament. And while Rup does accept, because what choice does she have, really—Faizunnesa does not. After a seven-day fight, she leaves her husband and gives up one of their two daughters, for she refuses to come second. She was devout enough to know that there is only one worthy



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

and two-hour power cuts. The candlelight is a shared experience with Faizunnesa. There are ghost stories told in the semi-darkness: the one about the woodcutter who had returned to finish cutting a tree, and the cut had closed; the one about the night-bus ride down a road that couldn't be found anymore in the morning; and the one about the guests that don't come anymore because everyone has their own

a turbaned patriarch, an unsmiling couple. In "Jalal's Letter to Rupbanu" in *Rupjalal*, Faizunnesa writes:

*To the love of my life, my heart's idol, my hypnotizer, redeemer of danger, sojourner of sorrows, lavishly mirthful lover, enchantress of the world, my amusing darling, nectar-lipped, sweet-voiced, dearest Srimoti Rupbati...*