

CREEPING HEMLOCK PRESS PRESENTS

NIGHTMARE

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Editorial, October 2012

John Joseph Adams

Welcome to issue one of *Nightmare*!

Nightmare is a new online horror and dark fantasy magazine. In our pages, you will find all kinds of horror fiction, from zombie stories and haunted house tales to visceral psychological horror.

Every month we plan on bringing you a mix of originals and reprints, and featuring a variety of authors—from the bestsellers and award-winners you already know to the best new voices you haven't heard of yet. When you read *Nightmare*, it is our hope that you'll see where horror comes from, where it is now, and where it's going.

Nightmare will also include nonfiction, fiction podcasts, and Q&As with our authors that go behind-the-scenes of their stories. Our planned publication schedule each month will include two pieces of original fiction and two fiction reprints, along with a feature interview and an artist gallery showcasing our cover artist. We will publish ebook issues on the first of every month, which will be available for sale in ePub and mobi format via our website and also available in other formats such as

Kindle and Nook. We will also offer subscriptions to our ebook edition in a variety of formats. Each issue's contents will be serialized on our website throughout the month, with new features publishing on the first four Wednesdays of every month.

Our goal with *Nightmare*, at its most basic, is to bring great horror short fiction to the masses. And with our editorial model of publishing two original stories alongside two reprints every month, I think we'll be able to expose horror readers to a lot of great stories, both new and classic. Also, I hope to bring a more diverse audience to *Nightmare*, and to publish a more diverse range of authors; I'm hoping that my extensive experience in science fiction and fantasy will bring some of those readers and writers over to the dark side (and perhaps vice versa as well).

As I said above, *Nightmare* will typically feature two original stories and two reprints in every issue. For our debut issue, however, we will be bringing you four all-new, never before published horror stories: "Property Condemned" by Jonathan Maberry, "Frontier Death Song" by Laird Barron, "Good Fences" by Genevieve Valentine, and "Afterlife" by Sarah Langan.

We'll also have author spotlights with each of our authors, as well as an in-depth feature interview with

horror legend Peter Straub. And finally we'll have the first installment of "The H Word," a monthly column which will focus on exploring the many facets of the field of horror.

So that's our first issue; we hope you enjoy it!

Future issues will contain work by bestselling and award-winning authors Ramsey Campbell, Sarah Langan (a second story!), Jeff VanderMeer, and Daniel H. Wilson. Plus, we'll have stories from exciting newcomers such as Desirina Boskovich, Tamsyn Muir, J. B. Park, and Matt Williamson. If that lineup of forthcoming fiction sounds good to you, the best way to ensure that you never miss an issue—and the best way to support the magazine—is to subscribe. So please consider doing so, and tell a friend!

Speaking of friends, thanks again to everyone who contributed to our Kickstarter campaign and showed us that crucial early support to help us get the magazine off the ground. Once again, we salute you! We hope you'll find that your faith in us was well-placed.

That's about all I have for you this month, but before I step out of your way here and let you get to the fiction, here are a few URLs you might want to check out or keep handy if you'd like to stay apprised of everything new and notable happening with *Nightmare*:

- Website: nightmare-magazine.com
- Newsletter: nightmare-magazine.com/newsletter
- RSS feed: nightmare-magazine.com/rss-2
- Podcast feed: nightmare-magazine.com/itunes-rss
- Twitter: [@nightmaremag](https://twitter.com/nightmaremag)
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Thanks for reading!

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor of *Nightmare* (and its sister magazine, *Lightspeed*), is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *Other Worlds Than These*, *Armored*, *Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He is a four-time finalist for the Hugo Award and a four-time finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Forthcoming anthologies include: *Epic* (November, Tachyon), *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination* (2013, Tor), and *Robot Uprisings* (2013, Doubleday). He is also the co-host of Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter [@johnjosephadams](https://twitter.com/johnjosephadams).

Property Condemned: A Story of Pine Deep

Jonathan Maberry

-1-

The house was occupied, but no one lived there.

That's how Malcolm Crow thought about it. Houses like the Croft place were never really empty.

Like most of the kids in Pine Deep, Crow knew that there were ghosts. Even the tourists knew about the ghosts. It was that kind of town.

All of the tourist brochures had pictures of ghosts on them. Happy, smiling, Casper the Friendly Ghost sorts of ghosts. Every store in town had a rack of books about the ghosts of Pine Deep. Crow had every one of those books. He couldn't braille his way through a basic geometry test or recite the U.S. Presidents in any reliable order, but he knew about shades and crisis apparitions, church grims and banshees, crossroads ghosts and poltergeists. He read every story and historical account; saw every movie he could afford to see. Every once in a while, Crow would even risk one of his father's frequent beatings to sneak out of bed and tiptoe down to the basement to watch Double Chiller Theater on the flickering old Emerson. If

his dad caught him and took a belt to him, it was okay as long as Crow managed to see at least *one* good spook flick.

Besides, beatings were nothing to Crow. At nine years old he'd had so many that they'd lost a lot of their novelty.

It was the ghosts that mattered. Crow would give a lot—maybe everything he had in this world—to actually *meet* a ghost. That would be . . . well, Crow didn't know what it would be. Not exactly. *Fun* didn't seem to be the right word. Maybe what he really wanted was *proof*. He worried about that. About wanting proof that something existed beyond the world he knew.

He believed that he believed, but he wasn't sure that he was right about it. That he was aware of this inconsistency only tightened the knots. And fueled his need.

His *hunger*.

Ghosts mattered to Malcolm Crow because whatever they were, they clearly outlasted whatever had killed them. Disease, murder, suicide, war, brutality . . . abuse. The causes of their deaths were over, but they had survived. That's why Crow wasn't scared of ghosts. What frightened him—deep down on a level where feelings had no specific structure—was the possibility that they might

not exist. That this world was all that there was.

And the Croft house? That place was different. Crow had never worked up the nerve to go there. Almost nobody ever went out there. Nobody really talked about it, though everyone knew about it.

Crow made a point of visiting the other well-known haunted spots—the tourist spots—hoping to see a ghost. All he wanted was a glimpse. In one of his favorite books on hauntings, the writer said that a glimpse was what most people usually got. “Ghosts are elusive,” the author had written. “You don’t form a relationship with one, you’re lucky if you catch a glimpse out of the corner of your eye; but if you do, you’ll know it for what it is. One glimpse can last you a lifetime.”

So far, Crow had not seen or even heard a single ghost. Not one cold spot, not a single whisper of old breath, not a hint of something darting away out of the corner of his eye. Nothing, zilch. Nada.

However, he had never gone into the Croft place. Until today.

Crow touched the front pocket of his jeans to feel the outline of his lucky stone. Still there. It made him smile. Maybe now he’d finally get to see a ghost.

They pedaled through dappled sunlight, sometimes four abreast, sometimes single file when the trail dwindled down to a crooked deer path. Crow knew the way to the Croft place and he was always out front, though he liked it best when Val Guthrie rode beside him. As they bumped over hard-packed dirt and whispered through uncut summer grass, Crow cut frequent, covert looks at Val.

Val was amazing. Beautiful. She rode straight and alert on her pink Huffy, pumping the pedals with her purple sneakers. Hair as glossy black as crow feathers, tied in a bouncing ponytail. Dark blue eyes and a serious mouth. Crow made it his life's work to coax a smile out of her at least once a day. It was hard work, but worth it.

The deer path spilled out onto an old forestry service road that allowed them once more to fan out into a line. Val caught up and fell in beside Crow on the left, and almost at once Terry and Stick raced each other to be first on the right. Terry and Stick were always racing, always daring each other, always trying to prove who was best, fastest, smartest, strongest. Terry always won the strongest part.

“The Four Horsemen ride!” bellowed Stick, his voice

breaking so loudly that they all cracked up. Stick didn't mind his voice cracking. There was a fifty-cent bet that he'd have his grown-up voice before Terry. Crow privately agreed. Despite his size, Terry had a high voice that always sounded like his nose was full of snot.

Up ahead, the road forked, splitting off toward the ranger station on the right and a weedy path on the left. On the left-hand side, a sign leaned drunkenly toward them.

**PRIVATE PROPERTY
NO ADMITTANCE
TRESPASSERS WILL BE**

That was all of it. The rest of the sign had been pinged off by bullet holes over the years. It was a thing to do. You shot the sign to the Croft place to show that you weren't afraid. Crow tried to make sense of that, but there wasn't any end to the string of logic.

He turned to Val with a grin. "Almost there."

"Oooo, spooky!" said Stick, lowering the bill of his Phillies ball-cap to cast his face in shadows.

Val nodded. No smile. No flash of panic. Only a nod. Crow wondered if Val was bored, interested, skeptical, or scared. With her, you couldn't tell. She had enough

Lenape blood to give her that stone face. Her mom was like that, too. Not her dad, though. Mr. Guthrie was always laughing, and Crow suspected that he, too, had a lifelong mission that involved putting smiles on the faces of the Guthrie women.

Crow said, “It won’t be too bad.”

Val shrugged. “It’s *just* a house.” She leaned a little heavier on the word “just” every time she said that, and she’d been doing that ever since Crow suggested they come out here. *Just* a house.

Crow fumbled for a comeback that would chip some of the ice off of those words, but, as he so often did, he failed.

It was Terry Wolfe who came to his aid. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, Val, you keep saying that but I’ll bet you’ll chicken out before we even get onto the porch.”

Terry liked Val, too, but he spent a lot of time putting her down and making fun of whatever she said. Though, if any of that actually hurt Val, Crow couldn’t see it. Val was like that. She didn’t show a thing. Even when that jerk Vic Wingate pushed her and knocked her down in the schoolyard last April, Val hadn’t yelled, hadn’t cried. All she did was get up, walk over to Vic and wipe the blood from her scraped palms on his shirt. Then, as Vic started calling her words that Crow had only heard his

dad ever use when he was really hammered, Val turned and walked away like it was a normal spring day.

So Terry's sarcasm didn't make a dent.

Terry and Stick immediately launched into the Addams Family theme song loud enough to scare the birds from the trees.

A startled doe dashed in blind panic across their path and Stick tracked it with his index finger and dropped his thumb like a hammer.

“Pow!”

Val gave him a withering look, but she didn't say anything.

They rounded the corner and skidded to a stop, one, two, three, four. Dust plumes rose behind them like ghosts and drifted away on a breeze as if fleeing from this place. The rest of the song dwindled to dust on their tongues.

It stood there.

The Croft house.

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The place even *looked* haunted.

Three stories tall, with all sorts of angles jutting out

for no particular reason. Gray shingles hung crookedly from their nails. The windows were dark and grimed. Some were broken out. Most of the storm shutters were closed, but a few hung open and one lay half-buried in a dead rosebush. Missing slats in the porch railing gave it a gap-toothed grin. Like a jack-o'-lantern. Like a skull.

On any other house, Crow would have loved that. He would have appreciated the attention to detail.

But his dry lips did not want to smile.

Four massive willows, old and twisted by rot and disease, towered over the place, their long fingers bare of leaves even in the flush of summer. The rest of the forest stood back from the house as if unwilling to draw any nearer. Like people standing around a coffin, Crow thought.

His fingers traced the outline of the lucky stone in his jeans pocket.

“Jeeez,” said Stick softly.

“Holy moley,” agreed Terry.

Val said, “It’s *just* a house.”

Without turning to her, Terry said, “You keep saying that, Val, but I don’t see you running up onto the porch.”

Val’s head swiveled around like a praying mantis’s and she skewered Terry with her blue eyes. “And when *exactly* was the last time you had the guts to even come

here, Terrence Henry Wolfe? Oh, what was that? Never? What about you, George Stickler?”

“Crow hasn’t been here either,” said Stick defensively.

“I know. Apparently three of the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are sissies.”

“Whoa, now!” growled Terry, swinging his leg off his bike. “There’s a lot of places we haven’t been. *You* haven’t been here, either—does that make you a sissy, too?”

“I don’t need to come to a crappy old house to try and prove anything,” she fired back. “I thought we were out riding bikes.”

“Yeah, but we’re here now,” persisted Terry, “so why don’t you show everyone how tough you are and go up on the porch?”

Val sat astride her pink Huffy, feet on the ground, hands on the rubber grips. “You’re the one trying to prove something. Let’s see you go first.”

Terry’s ice-blue eyes slid away from hers. “I never said I wanted to go in.”

“Then what *are* you saying?”

“I’m just saying that you’re the one who’s always saying there’s no such thing as haunted houses, but you’re still scared to go up there.”

“Who said I was scared?” Val snapped.

“You’re saying you’re not?” asked Terry.

Crow and Stick watched this exchange like spectators at a tennis match. They both kept all expression off their faces, well aware of how far Val could be pushed. Terry was getting really close to that line.

“*Everyone’s* too scared to go in there,” Terry said, “and—”

“And *what?*” she demanded.

“And . . . I guess nobody should.”

“Oh, chicken poop. It’s just a stupid old house.”

Terry folded his arms. “Yeah, but I still don’t see you on that porch.”

Val made a face, but didn’t reply. They all looked at the house. The old willows looked like withered trolls, bent with age and liable to do something nasty. The Croft house stood, half in shadows and half in sunlight.

Waiting.

It wants us to come in, thought Crow, and he shivered.

“How do you know the place is really haunted?” asked Stick.

Terry punched him on the arm. “*Everybody* knows it’s haunted.”

“Yeah, okay, but . . . how?”

“Ask Mr. Halloween,” said Val. “He knows everything about this crap.”

They all looked at Crow.

“It’s not crap,” he insisted. “C’mon, guys, this is Pine Deep. Everybody knows there are ghosts everywhere here.”

“You ever see one?” asked Stick, and for once there was no mockery in his voice. If anything, he looked a little spooked.

“No,” admitted Crow, “but a lot of people have. Jim Polk’s mom sees one all the time.”

They nodded. Mrs. Polk swore that she saw a partially formed figure of a woman in Colonial dress walking through the backyard. A few of the neighbors said they saw it, too.

“And Val’s dad said that Gus Bernhardt’s uncle Kurt was so scared by a poltergeist in his basement that he took to drinking.”

Kurt Bernhardt was a notorious drunk—worse than Crow’s father—and he used to be a town deputy until one day he got so drunk that he threw up on a town selectman while trying to write him a parking ticket.

“Dad used to go over to the Bernhardt place a lot,” said Val, “but he never saw any ghosts.”

“I heard that not everybody sees ghosts,” said Terry.

He took a plastic comb out of his pocket and ran it through his hair, trying to look cool and casual, like there was no haunted house forty feet away.

“Yeah,” agreed Stick, “and I heard that people sometimes see *different* ghosts.”

“What do you mean ‘different ghosts’?” asked Val.

Stick shrugged. “Something my gran told me. She said that a hundred people can walk through the same haunted place, and most people won’t see a ghost because they can’t, and those who do will see their own ghost.”

“Wait,” said Terry, “what?”

Crow nodded. “I heard that, too. It’s an old Scottish legend. The people who don’t see ghosts are the ones who are afraid to believe in them.”

“And the people who *do* see a ghost,” Stick continued, “see the ghost of their own future.”

“That’s stupid,” said Val. “How can you see your own ghost if you’re alive?”

“Yeah,” laughed Terry. “That’s stupid, even for you.”

“No, really,” said Crow. “I read that in my books. Settlers used to believe that.”

Stick nodded. “My gran’s mom came over from Scotland. She said that there are a lot of ghosts over there, and that sometimes people saw their own. Not themselves as dead people, not like that. Gran said that people saw

their own *spirits*. She said that there were places where the walls between the worlds were so thin that past, present, and future were like different rooms in a house with no doors. That's how she put it. Sometimes you could stand in one room and see different part of your life in another."

"That would scare the crap out of me," said Terry.

A sudden breeze caused the shutters on one of the windows to bang as loud as a gunshot. They all jumped.

"Jeeeeeee-zus!" gasped Stick. "Nearly gave me a heart attack!"

They laughed at their own nerves, but the laughs died away as one by one they turned back to look at the Croft house.

"You really want me to go in there?" asked Val, her words cracking the fragile silence.

Terry said, sliding his comb back into his pocket, "Sure."

"No!" yelled Crow.

Everyone suddenly looked at him: Val in surprise, Stick with a grin forming on his lips, Terry with a frown.

The moment held for three or four awkward seconds, and then Val pushed her kickstand down and got off of her bike.

"Fine then."

She took three decisive steps toward the house. Crow and the others stayed exactly where they were. When Val realized she was alone, she turned and gave them her best ninja death stare. Crow knew this stare all too well; his buttocks clenched and his balls tried to climb up into his chest cavity. Not even that creep Vic Wingate gave her crap when Val had that look in her eyes.

“What I ought to do,” she said coldly, “is make you three sissies go in with me.”

“No way,” laughed Terry, as if it was the most absurd idea anyone had ever said aloud.

“Okay!” blurted Crow.

Terry and Stick looked at him with a *Nice going, Judas* look in their eyes.

Val smiled. Crow wasn't sure if she was smiling at him or smiling in triumph. Either way, he put it in the win category. He was one smile up on the day's average.

Crow's bike had no kickstand so he got off and leaned it against a maple, considered, then picked it up and turned it around so that it pointed the way they'd come. Just in case.

“You coming?” he asked Stick and Terry.

“If I'm going in,” said Val acidly, “then we're *all* going in. It's only fair and I don't want to hear any different or so help me God, Terry . . .”

She left the rest to hang. When she was mad, Val not only spoke like an adult, she sounded like her mother.

Stick winced and punched Terry on the arm. “Come on, numb-nuts.”

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The four of them clustered together on the lawn, knee-deep in weeds. Bees and blowflies swarmed in the air around them. No one moved for more than a minute. Crow could feel the spit in his mouth drying to paste.

I want to do this, he thought, but that lie sounded exactly like what it was.

The house glowered down at him.

The windows, even the shuttered ones, were like eyes. The ones with broken panes were like the empty eye-sockets of old skulls, like the ones in the science class in school. Crow spent hours staring into those dark eye-holes, wondering if there was anything of the original owner’s personality in there. Not once did he feel anything. Now, just looking at those black and empty windows made Crow shudder, because he was getting the itchy feeling that there *was* something looking back.

The shuttered windows somehow bothered him more

than the open ones. They seemed . . . he fished for the word.

Sneaky?

No, that wasn't right. That was too cliché, and Crow had read every ghost story he could find. Sneaky wasn't right. He dug through his vocabulary and came up short. The closest thing that seemed to fit—and Crow had no idea *how* it fit—was *hungry*.

He almost laughed. How could shuttered windows look hungry?

“That’s stupid.”

It wasn't until Stick turned to him and asked what he was talking about that Crow realized he'd spoken the words aloud.

He looked at the others and all of them, even Val, were stiff with apprehension. The Croft house scared them. Really scared them.

Because they believed there was something in there.

They all paused there in the yard, closer to their bikes and the road than they were to that porch.

They believed.

Crow wanted to shout and he wanted to laugh.

“Well,” said Val, “let’s go.”

The Four Horseman, unhorsed, approached the porch.

The steps creaked.

Of course they did. Crow would have been disappointed if they hadn't. He suppressed a smile. The front door was going to creak, too; those old hinges were going to screech like a cat. It was how it was all supposed to be.

It's real, he told himself. There's a ghost in there. There's something in there.

It was the second of those two thoughts that felt correct. Not *right* exactly—but *correct*. There was *something* in that house. If they went inside, they'd find it.

No, whispered a voice from deeper inside his mind, if we go inside, it will find us.

“Good,” murmured Crow. This time he said it so softly that none of the others heard him.

He wanted it to find them.

Please let it find us.

They crossed the yard in silence. The weeds were high and brown, as if they could draw no moisture at all from the hard ground. Crow saw bits of debris there, half-hidden by the weeds. A baseball whose hide had turned a sickly yellow and whose seams had split like torn surgical

sutures. Beyond that was a woman's dress shoe; just the one. There was a Triple-A road map of Pennsylvania, but the wind and rain had faded the details so that the whole state appeared to be under a heavy fog. Beyond that was an orange plastic pill bottle with its label peeled halfway back. Crow picked it up and read the label and was surprised to see that the pharmacy where this prescription had been filled was in Poland. The drug was called *Klozapol*, but Crow had no idea what that was or what it was used for. The bottle was empty but it looked pretty new. Crow let it drop and he touched the lucky stone in his pocket to reassure himself that it was still safe.

Still his.

The yard was filled with junk. An empty wallet, a ring of rusted keys, a soiled diaper, the buckle from a seat belt, a full box of graham crackers that was completely covered with ants. Stuff like that. Disconnected things. Like junk washed up on a beach.

Val knelt and picked up something that flashed silver in the sunlight.

“What's that?” asked Terry.

She held it up. It was an old Morgan silver dollar. Val spit on her thumb and rubbed the dirt away to reveal the profile of Lady Liberty. She squinted to read the date.

“Eighteen-ninety-five,” she said.

“Are you kidding me?” demanded Terry, bending close to study it. He was the only one of them who collected coins. “Dang, Val . . . that’s worth a lot of money.”

“Really?” asked Val, Crow and Stick at the same time.

“Yeah. A *lot* of money. I got some books at home we can look it up in. I’ll bet it’s worth a couple of thousand bucks.”

Crow goggled at him. Unlike the other three, Crow’s family was dirt poor. Even Stick, whose parents owned a tiny TV repair shop in town, had more money. Crow’s mom was dead and his father worked part-time at Shanahan’s Garage, then drank most of what he earned. Crow was wearing the same jeans this year that he wore all last season. Same sneakers, too. He and his brother Billy had learned how to sew well enough to keep their clothes from falling apart.

So he stared at the coin that might be worth a few thousand dollars.

Val turned the coin over. The other side had a carving of an eagle with its wings outstretched. The words UNITED STATES OF AMERICA arched over it and ONE DOLLAR looped below it. But above the eagle where IN GOD WE TRUST should have been, someone

had gouged deep into the metal, totally obscuring the phrase.

Terry gasped as if he was in actual physical pain.

“Bet it ain’t worth as much like that,” said Stick with a nasty grin.

Val shrugged and shoved the coin into her jeans pocket.

“Whatever. Come on.”

It was a high porch, and they climbed four steep steps to the deck. Each step was littered with dried leaves and withered locust husks. Crow wondered where the leaves had come from; it was the height of summer. Except for the willows, everything everywhere was alive, and those willows looked like they’d been dead for years. Besides, these were dogwood leaves. He looked around for the source of the leaves, but there were no dogwoods in the yard. None anywhere he could see.

He grunted.

“What?” asked Val, but Crow didn’t reply. It wasn’t the sort of observation that was going to encourage anyone.

“The door’s probably locked,” said Terry. “This is a waste of time.”

“Don’t even,” warned Val.

The floorboards creaked, each with a different note of agonized wood.

As they passed one of the big shuttered windows, Stick paused and frowned at it. Terry and Val kept walking, but Crow slowed and lingered a few paces away. As he watched, the frown on Stick's mouth melted away and his friend stood there with no expression at all on his face.

“Stick . . . ?”

Stick didn't answer. He didn't even twitch.

“Yo . . . Stick.”

This time Stick jumped as if Crow had pinched him. He whirled and looked at Crow with eyes that were wide but unfocused.

“What did you say?” he asked, his voice a little slurred. Like Dad's when he was starting to tie one on.

“I didn't say anything. I just called your name.”

“No,” said Stick, shaking his head. “You called me ‘daddy.’ What's that supposed to mean?”

Crow laughed. “You're hearing things, man.”

Stick whipped his ball-cap off his head and slapped Crow's shoulder. “Hey . . . I *heard* you.”

Terry heard this and he gave Stick a quizzical smile, waiting for the punch-line. “What's up?”

Stick wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and stared down as if expecting there to be something other than a faint sheen of spit. He touched the corner of his

mouth and looked at his fingers. His hands were shaking as he pulled his ball-cap on and snugged it down low.

“What are you doing?” asked Terry, his smile flickering.

Stick froze. “Why? Do I have something on my face?”

“Yeah,” said Terry.

Stick’s face blanched white and he jabbed at his skin. The look in his eyes was so wild and desperate that it made Crow’s heart hurt. He’d seen a look like that once when a rabbit was tangled up in some barbed wire by the Carby place. The little animal was covered in blood and its eyes were huge, filled with so much terror that it couldn’t even blink. Even as Crow and Val tried to free it, the rabbit shuddered and died.

Scared to death.

For just a moment, Stick looked like that, and the sight of that expression drove a cold sliver of ice into Crow’s stomach. He could feel his scrotum contract into a wrinkled little walnut.

Stick pawed at his face. “What is it?”

“Don’t worry,” said Terry, “it’s just a dose of the uglies, but you had that when you woke up this morning.”

Terry laughed like a donkey.

No one else did.

Stick glared at him and his nervous fingers tightened

into fists. Crow was sure that he was going to smash Terry in the mouth. But then Val joined them.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

Her stern tone broke the spell of the moment.

“Nothing,” said Stick as he abruptly pushed past Terry and stalked across the porch, his balled fists at his sides. The others gaped at him.

“What—?” began Terry, but he had nowhere to go with it. After a moment he followed Stick.

Val and Crow lingered for a moment.

“Did they have a fight or something?” Val asked quietly.

“I don’t know what that was,” admitted Crow. He told her exactly what happened. Val snorted.

“Boys,” she said, leaving it there. She walked across the porch and stood in front of the door.

Crow lingered for a moment, trying to understand what just happened. Part of him wanted to believe that Stick just saw a ghost. He wanted that very badly. The rest of him—*most* of him—suddenly wanted to turn around, jump on the bike that was nicely positioned for a quick escape, and never come back here. The look in Stick’s eyes had torn all the fun out of this.

“Let’s get this over with,” said Val, and that trapped all of them in the moment. The three boys looked at her,

but none of them looked at each other. Not for a whole handful of brittle seconds. Val, however, studied each of them. “Boys,” she said again.

Under the lash of her scorn, they followed her.

The doors were shut, but even before Val touched the handle, Crow knew that these doors wouldn't be locked.

It wants us to come in.

Terry licked his lips and said, “What do you suppose is in there?”

Val shook her head, and Crow noted that she was no longer saying that this was *just* a house.

Terry nudged Crow with his elbow. “You ever talk to anybody's been in here?”

“No.”

“You ever know anyone who knows anyone who's been in here?”

Crow thought about it. “Not really.”

“Then how do you know it's even haunted?” asked Val.

“I don't.”

It was a lie and Crow knew that everyone read it that way. No one called him on it, though. Maybe they would have when they were still in the yard, but not now. There was a line somewhere and Crow knew—they all knew—they'd crossed it.

Maybe it was when Stick looked at the shuttered windows and freaked out.

Maybe it was when they came up on the porch.

Maybe, maybe . . .

Val took a breath, set her jaw, gripped the rusted and pitted brass knob, and turned it.

The lock clicked open.

A soft sound. Not at all threatening.

It wants us to come in, Crow thought again, knowing it to be true.

Then there was another sound, and Crow was sure only he heard it. Not the lock, not the hinges; it was like the small intake of breath you hear around the dinner table when the knife is poised to make the first cut into a Thanksgiving turkey. The blade gleams, the turkey steams, mouths water, and each of the ravenous diners takes in a small hiss of breath as the naked reality of hunger is undisguised.

Val gave the door a little push and let go of the knob.

The hinges creaked like they were supposed to. It was a real creak, too. Not another hungry hiss. If the other sound had been one of expectation then the creak was the plunge of the knife.

Crow knew this even if he wasn't old enough yet to form the thoughts as cogently as he would in later years.

Right now those impressions floated in his brain, more like colors or smells than structured thoughts. Even so, he understood them on a visceral level.

As the door swung open, Crow understood something else, too; two things, really.

The first was that, after today, he would never again need proof of anything in the unseen world.

And the second was that going into the Croft house was a mistake.

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They went in anyway.

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The door opened into a vestibule that was paneled in rotting oak. The broken globe light fixture on the ceiling above them was filled with dead bugs. There were no cobwebs, though, and no rat droppings on the floor.

In the back of Crow's mind he knew that he should have been worried about that. By the time the thought came to the front of his mind, it was too late.

The air inside was curiously moist, and it stank. It

wasn't the smell of dust, or the stench of rotting meat. That's what Crow had expected; this was different. It was a stale, acidic smell that reminded him more of his father's breath after he came home from the bar. Crow knew that smell from all of the times his father bent over him, shouting at him while he whipped his belt up and down, up and down. The words his father shouted seldom made any sense. The stink of his breath was what Crow remembered. It was what he forced his mind to concentrate on so that he didn't feel the burning slap of the belt. Crow had gotten good at that over the years. He still felt the pain—in the moment and in the days following each beating—but he was able to pull his mind out of his body with greater ease each time as long as he focused on something else. How or why that distraction had become his father's pickled breath was something Crow never understood.

And now, as they moved from the vestibule into the living room, Crow felt as if the house itself was breathing at him with that same stink.

Crow never told his friends about the beatings. They all knew—Crow was almost always bruised somewhere—but this was small-town Pennsylvania in 1974 and nobody ever talked about stuff like that. Not even his teachers. Just as Stick never talked about the fact that

both of his sisters had haunted looks in their eyes and never—*ever*—let themselves be alone with their father. Not if they could avoid it. Janie and Kim had run away a couple of times each, but they never said why. You just didn't talk about some things. Nobody did.

Nobody.

Certainly not Crow.

So he had no point of reference for discussing the stink of this house. To mention it to his friends would require that he explain what else it smelled like. That was impossible. He'd rather die.

The house wanted us to come in, he thought, and now we're in.

Crow looked at the others. Stick hung back, almost crouching inside the vestibule and the wild look was back on his face. Terry stood with his hands in his pockets, but from the knuckley lumps under the denim Crow knew that he had his fists balled tight. Val had her arms wrapped around her chest as if she stood in a cold wind. No one was looking at him.

No one was looking at each other. Except for Crow.

Now we're inside.

Crow knew what would happen. He'd seen every movie about haunted houses, read every book. He had all the Warren *Eerie* and *Creepy* comics. He even had some

of the old E.C. comics. He knew.

The house is going to fool us. It'll separate us. It'll kill us, one by one.

That's the way it always was. The ghost—or ghosts—would pull them apart, lead them into darkened cellars or hidden passages. They'd be left alone, and alone each one of them would die. Knives in the dark, missing stairs in a lightless hall, trapdoors, hands reaching out of shadows. They'd all die in here. Apart and alone. That was the way it always happened.

Except . . .

Except that it did not happen that way.

Crow saw something out of the corner of his eye. He turned to see a big mirror mounted on the wall. Dusty, cracked, the glass fogged.

He saw himself in the mirror.

Himself and not himself.

Crow stepped closer.

The reflection stepped closer, too.

Crow and Crow stared at each other. The boy with bruises, and a man who looked like his father. But it wasn't his father. It was Crow's own face, grown up, grown older. Pale, haggard, the jaws shadowy with a week's worth of unshaved whiskers, vomit stains drying on the shirt. A uniform shirt. A police uniform. Wrinkled

and stained, like Kurt Bernhardt's. Even though it was a reflection, Crow could smell the vomit. The piss. The rank stink of exhaled booze and unbrushed teeth.

“Fuck you, you little shit,” he said. At first Crow thought the cop was growling at him, but then Crow turned and saw Val and Terry. Only they were different. Everything was different, and even though the mirror was still there, nothing else was the same. This was outside, at night, in town. And the Val and Terry the cop was cursing at quietly were all grown up. They weren't reflections; they were real, they were here. Wherever and *whenever* here was.

Val was tall and beautiful, with long black hair and eyes that were filled with laughter. And she *was* laughing—laughing at something Terry said. There were even laugh lines around her mouth. They walked arm-in-arm past the shop windows on Corn Hill. She wore a dress and Terry was in a suit. Terry was huge, massive and muscular, but the suit he wore was expensive and perfectly tailored. He whispered to Val, and she laughed again. Then at the corner of Corn Hill and Baker Lane, they stopped to kiss. Val had to fight her laughs in order to kiss, and even then the kiss disintegrated into more laughs. Terry cracked up, too, and then they turned and continued walking along the street. They strolled

comfortably. Like people who were walking home.

Home. Not home as kids on bikes, but to some place where they lived together as adults. Maybe as husband and wife.

Val and Terry.

Crow turned back to the mirror, which stood beside the cop—the only part of the Croft house that still existed in this world. The cop—the older Crow—stood in the shadows under and elm tree and watched Val and Terry. Tears ran like lines of mercury down his cheeks. Snot glistened on his upper lip. He sank down against the trunk of the tree, toppling the last few inches as his balance collapsed. He didn't even try to stop his fall, but instead lay with his cheek against the dirt. Some loose coins and a small stone fell out of the man's pocket.

Crow patted his own pocket. The lucky stone was there.

Still there.

Still his.

The moment stretched into a minute and then longer as Crow watched the drunken man weep in wretched silence. He wanted to turn away, but he couldn't. Not because the image was so compelling, but because when Crow actually tried to turn . . . he simply could not make his body move. He was frozen into that scene.

Locked.

Trapped.

The cop kept crying.

“Stop it,” said Crow. He meant to say it kindly, but the words banged out of him, as harsh as a pair of slaps.

The cop froze, lifting his head as if he'd heard the words.

His expression was alert but filled with panic, like a deer who had just heard the crunch of a heavy footfall in the woods. It didn't last. The drunken glaze stole over it and the tense lips grew rubbery and slack. The cop hauled himself to a sitting position with his back to the tree, and the effort winded him so that he sat panting like a dog, his face greasy with sweat. Behind the alcohol haze, something dark and ugly and lost moved in his eyes.

Crow recognized it. The same shapeless thing moved behind his own eyes every time he looked in the mirror. Especially after a beating. But the shape in his eyes was smaller than this, less sharply defined. His usually held more panic, and there was none at all here. Panic, he would later understand, was a quality of hope, even of wounded hope. In the cop's eyes, there was only fear. Not fear of death—Crow was experienced enough with fear to understand that much. No, this was the fear that, as terrible as this was, life was as good as it would ever be

again. All that was left was the slide downhill.

“No . . .” murmured Crow, because he knew what was going to happen.

The cop’s fingers twitched like worms waiting for the hook. They crawled along his thigh, over his hip bone. They found the leather holster and the gnarled handle of the Smith and Wesson.

Crow could not bear to watch. He needed to not see this. A scream tried to break from him, and he *wanted* it to break. A scream could break chains. A scream could push the boogeyman away. A scream could shatter this mirror.

But Crow could not scream.

Instead he watched as those white, trembling fingers curled around the handle of the gun and pulled it slowly from the holster.

He still could not turn . . . but now his hands could move. A little and with a terrible sluggishness, but they moved. His own fingers crawled along his thigh, felt for his pocket, wormed their way inside.

The click of the hammer being pulled back was impossibly loud.

Crow’s fingers curled around the stone. It was cold and hard and so . . . *real*.

He watched the cylinder of the pistol rotate as the

cop's thumb pulled the hammer all the way back.

Tears burned like acid in Crow's eyes and he summoned every ounce of will to pull the stone from his pocket. It came so slowly. It took a thousand years.

But it came out.

The cop lifted the barrel of the pistol and put it under his chin. His eyes were squeezed shut.

Crow raised his fist, and the harder he squeezed the stone the more power he had in his arm.

"I'm sorry . . ." Crow said, mumbling the two words through lips bubbling with spit.

The cop's finger slipped inside the curled trigger guard.

"I'm so sorry . . ."

Crow threw the stone at the same moment the cop pulled the trigger.

The stone struck the mirror a microsecond before the firing pin punched a hole in the world.

There was a sound. It wasn't the smash of mirror glass and it wasn't the bang of a pistol. It was something vast and black and impossible and it was the loudest sound Crow would ever hear. It was so monstrously loud that it broke the world.

Shards of mirror glass razored through the air around Crow, slashing him, digging deep into his flesh, gouging

burning wounds in his mind. As each one cut him, the world shifted around Crow, buffeting him into different places, into different lives.

He saw Terry. The adult Terry, but now he was even older than the one who had been laughing with Val. It was crazy weird, but somehow Crow knew that this was as real as anything in his world.

Terry's face was lined with pain, his body crisscrossed with tiny cuts. Pieces of a broken mirror lay scattered around him. Each separate piece reflected Terry, but none of them were the Terry who stood in the midst of the debris. Each reflection was a distortion, a funhouse twist of Terry's face. Some were laughing—harsh and loud and fractured. Some were weeping. Some were glazed and catatonic. And one, a single large piece, showed a face that was more monster than man. Lupine and snarling and so completely *wrong*. The Terry who stood above the broken pieces screamed and if there was any sanity left in his mind it did not shine out through his blue eyes. Crow saw a version of his best friend who was completely and irretrievably *lost*.

Terry screamed and screamed, and then he spun around, ran straight across the room and threw himself headfirst out of the window. Crow fell with him. Together

they screamed all the way down to the garden flagstones.

The impact shoved Crow into another place.

He was there with Val. They were in the cornfields behind Val's house. A black rain hammered down, the sky veined with red lightning. Val was older . . . maybe forty years old. She ran through the corn, skidding, slipping in the mud. Running toward a figure that lay sprawled on the ground.

“Dad!” screamed Val.

Mr. Guthrie lay on his stomach, his face pressed into the muck. In the brightness of the lightning, Crow could see a neat round bullet hole between his shoulder blades, the cloth washed clean of blood by the downpour.

“*No!*” shrieked Val. She dropped to her knees and clawed her father into her arms. His big old body resisted her, fighting her with limpness and weight and sopping clothes, but eventually Val found the strength to turn him onto his back.

“Daddy . . . Daddy . . .?”

His face was totally slack, streaked with mud that clumped on his mustache and caught in his bushy eyebrows.

Val wiped the mud off his face and shook him very gently.

“Daddy . . . *please* . . .”

The lightning never stopped, and the thunder bellowed insanely. A freak eddy of wind brought sounds from the highway. The high, lonely wail of a police siren, but Crow knew that the cops would be too late. They were already too late.

Crow spun out of that moment and into another. There were police sirens here, too, and the flashing red and blue lights, but no rain. This was a different place, a different moment. A different horror.

He was there.

He was a cop.

He was sober. Was he younger or older? He prayed that this was him as an older man, just as Val and Terry had been older.

Older. Sober.

Alive.

But the moment was not offering any mercies.

Stick was there. He was on his knees and Crow was bent over him, forcing handcuffs onto his friend’s wrists. They were both speaking, saying the same things over and over again.

“What did you do? Christ, Stick, what did you *do*?”

“I’m sorry,” Stick said. “I’m sorry.”

On the porch of the house a female cop and an EMT were supporting a ten year old girl toward a waiting ambulance. The girl looked a lot like Janie and Kim, Stick's sisters, but Crow knew that she wasn't. He knew that this girl was Stick's daughter. Her face was bruised. Her clothes were torn. There was blood on her thighs.

“What did you do, Stick, what did you *do*?”

“I'm sorry,” wept Stick. His mouth bled from where Crow had punched him. “I'm sorry.”

Crow saw other images.

People he did not know. Some dressed in clothes from long ago, some dressed like everyone else. He stepped into sick rooms and cells, he crawled through the shattered windows of wrecked cars and staggered coughing through the smoke of burning houses.

Crow squeezed his eyes shut and clapped his hands over his ears. He screamed and screamed.

The house exhaled its liquor stink of breath at him.

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Crow heard Val yell. Not the woman, but the girl.

He opened his eyes and saw the Morgan silver dollar leave her outstretched hand. It flew past him and he

turned to see it strike the mirror. The same mirror he'd shattered with his lucky stone.

For just a moment he caught that same image of her kneeling in the rain, but then the glass detonated.

Then he was running.

He wasn't conscious of when he was able to run.

When he was *allowed* to run.

But he was running.

They were all running.

As Crow scrambled for the door he cast a single desperate look back to see that the mirror was undamaged by either stone or coin. All of the restraints that had earlier held his limbs were gone, as if the house, glutted on his pain, ejected the table scraps.

And so they ran.

Terry shoved Stick so hard that it knocked his ball-cap off of his head. No one stooped to pick it up. They crowded into the vestibule and burst out onto the porch and ran for their bikes. They were all screaming.

They screamed as they ran and they screamed as they got on their bikes.

Their screams dwindled as the house faded behind its screen of withered trees.

The four of them tore down the dirt road and burst onto the access road, and turned toward town, pumping

as hard as they could. They raced as hard and as fast as they could.

Only when they reached the edge of the pumpkin patch on the far side of the Guthrie farm did they slow and finally stop.

Panting, bathed in sweat, trembling, they huddled over their bikes, looking down at the frames, at their sneakered feet, at the dirt.

Not at each other.

Crow did not know if the others had seen the same things he'd seen. Or perhaps their own horrors.

Beside him, Terry seemed to be the first to recover. He reached into his pocket for his comb, but it wasn't there. He took a deep breath and let it out, then dragged trembling fingers through his hair.

"It must be dinner time," he said, and he turned his bike toward town and pedaled off. Terry did not look back.

Stick dragged his forearm across his face and looked at the smear, just as he had done before. Was he looking for tears? Or for the blood that had leaked from the corners of his mouth when the older Crow had punched him? A single sob broke in his chest, and he shook his head. Crow thought he saw Stick mouth those same two terrible words. *I'm sorry.*

Stick rode away.

That was the last time he went anywhere with Crow, Val, or Terry. During the rest of that summer and well into the fall, Stick went deep inside of himself. Eight years later, Crow read in the papers that George Stickler had swallowed an entire bottle of sleeping pills, though he was not yet as old as he had been in the vision. Crow was heartbroken but he was not surprised, and he wondered what the line was between the cowardice of suicide and an act of bravery.

For five long minutes Crow and Val sat on their bikes, one foot each braced on the ground. Val looked at the cornfields in the distance and Crow looked at her. Then, without saying a word, Val got off her bike and walked it down the lane toward her house. Crow sat there for almost half an hour before he could work up the courage to go home.

None of them ever spoke about that day. They never mentioned the Croft house. They never asked what the others had seen.

Not once.

The only thing that ever came up was the Morgan silver dollar. One evening Crow and Terry looked it up in a coin collector's book. In mint condition it was valued at forty-eight thousand dollars. In poor condition it was still

worth twenty thousand.

That coin probably still lay on the Croft house living room floor.

Crow and Terry looked at each other for a long time. Crow knew that they were both thinking about that coin. Twenty thousand dollars, just lying there. Right there.

It might as well have been on the dark side of the moon.

Terry closed his coin book and set it aside. As far as Crow knew, Terry never collected coins after that summer. He also knew that neither of them would ever go back for that silver dollar. Not for ten thousand dollars. Not for ten million. Like everything else they'd seen there—the wallet, the pill bottle, the diaper, all of it—the coin belonged to the house. Like Terry's pocket comb. Like Stick's ball-cap. And Crow's lucky stone.

And what belonged to the house would stay there.

The house kept its trophies.

Crow went to the library and looked through the back issues of newspapers, through obituaries, but try as he might he found no records at all of anyone ever having died there.

Somehow, it didn't surprise him.

There weren't ghosts in the Croft house. It wasn't that kind of thing.

He remembered what he'd thought when he first saw the old place.

The house is hungry.

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Later, after Crow came home from Terry's house, he sat in his room long into the night, watching the moon and stars rise from behind the trees and carve their scars across the sky. He sat with his window open, arms wrapped around his shins, shivering despite a hot breeze.

It was ten days since they'd gone running from the house.

Ten days and ten nights. Crow was exhausted. He'd barely slept, and when he did there were nightmares. Never—not once in any of those dreams—was there a monster or a ghoul chasing him. They weren't those kinds of dreams. Instead he saw the image that he'd seen in the mirror. The older him.

The drunk.

The fool.

Crow wept for that man.

For the man he knew that he was going to become.

He wept and he did not sleep. He tried, but even

though his eyes burned with fatigue, sleep simply would not come. Crow knew that it wouldn't come. Not tonight, and maybe not any night. Not as long as he could remember that house.

And he knew he could never forget it.

Around three in the morning, when his father's snores banged off the walls and rattled his bedroom door, Crow got up and, silent as a ghost, went into the hall and downstairs. Down to the kitchen, to the cupboard. The bottles stood in a row. Canadian Club. Mogen David 20/20. Thunderbird. And a bottle of vodka without a label. Cheap stuff, but a lot of it.

Crow stood staring at the bottles for a long time. Maybe half an hour.

"No," he told himself.

No, agreed his inner voice.

No, screamed the drunken man in his memory.

No.

Crow reached up and took down the vodka bottle. He poured some into a Dixie cup.

"No," he said.

And drank it.

Jonathan Maberry is a New York Times bestselling author, multiple Bram Stoker Award winner, and Marvel Comics writer. He's the author of many novels including *Assassin's Code*, *Flesh & Bone*, *Dead of Night*, *Patient Zero* and *Rot & Ruin*; and the editor of *V-Wars: A Chronicle of the Vampire Wars*. His nonfiction books cover topics ranging from martial arts to zombie pop-culture. Since 1978 he has sold more than 1200 magazine feature articles, 3000 columns, two plays, greeting cards, song lyrics, poetry, and textbooks. Jonathan continues to teach the celebrated Experimental Writing for Teens class, which he created. He founded the Writers Coffeehouse and co-founded The Liars Club, and is a frequent speaker at schools and libraries, as well as a keynote speaker and guest of honor at major writers and genre conferences.

Frontier Death Song

Laird Barron

Night descended on Interstate-90 as I crossed over into the Badlands. Real raw weather for October. Snow dusted the asphalt and picnic tables of the deserted rest area. The scene was virginal as death.

I parked the Chevy under one of the lamp posts that burned at either end of the lot. A metal building with a canted roof sat low and sleek in the center island, most of its windows dark. Against the black backdrop it reminded me of a crypt or monument to travelers and pioneers lost down through the years. Placards were obscured by shadows and could've pronounced warnings or curses, could've said anything in any language. Reality was pliable tonight. Periodically a semi chugged along the freeway, its running lights tiny and dim. Other than that, this was the Moon.

I loosed Minerva and watched her trot around the perimeter of the sodium glow. She raised her graying snout and growled softly at the void that surrounded us, poured from us. Her tracks and the infrequent firefly sparks on the road were the only signs of life for miles. Snow was falling thick, and those small signs wouldn't

last long. It was back to the previous ice age for us, the end for us. I kind-of, sort-of liked the idea that this might be the end, except for the fact sweet, loyal Minerva hadn't asked for any of it, and my nature—my atavistic shadow—was, as usual, a belligerent sonofabitch. My shadow exhibited the type of nature that causes men to weigh themselves with stones before they jump into the midnight blue, causes them to mix the pills with antifreeze, trade the pistol bullet to the brain for a shotgun barrel in the mouth, just to be on the safe side. My shadow didn't give a shit about odds, or eventualities, or pain, or certain death. It just wanted to keep shining.

So, Minerva pissed in the snow and I ticked off the seconds until the ultimate showdown.

My ear was killing tonight, crackling like a busted radio speaker and ringing with good old tinnitus. The sensation was that of an auger boring through membrane and meat. My back and knee ached. I lost the ear to a virus upon contracting pneumonia in Alaska during a long ago Iditarod. The spine and knee got ruined after I fell off a cliff into the Bering Sea and broke just about everything that was breakable. Resilience was my gift, and I'd recovered sufficiently to limp through the remainder of a wasted youth, to fake a hale and hearty demeanor. That shit was surely catching up now at the

precipice of the miserable slide into middle age. All those forgotten or ignored wounds blooming in a chorus of ghostly pain, reminders of longstanding debts, reminders that a man can't always outrun provenance. Sometimes *it* outruns *him*.

I checked my watch and the numbers blurred. I hadn't slept in way too long, else I never would've pulled over between Bumfuck, Egypt and Timbuktu. Since suicide by passivity was off the table, this was an expression of stubbornness on my part, probably. Grim defiance, or the need to reassert my faith in the logical operations of the universe if but for a moment.

What a joke, faith. What a sham, logic.

A hunting horn sounded far out there in the darkness beyond the humps and swales and treeless drumlins that went on basically forever, past the vast hungry prairies that had swallowed so many wagon trains.

Oh, yes. The horn of the Hunt.

Not simply a horn, but one that could easily be imagined as the hollowed relic from a giant, perverted ram with blood-specked foam lathering its muzzle and hellfire beaming from its eyes. A ram that crunched the bones of Saxons for breakfast and brandished a cock the girth of a wagon axle; the kind of brute that tribes sacrificed babies to when crops were bad and mated

unfortunate maidens to when the chief needed some special juju on the eve of a war. Its horn was the sort of artifact that stood on end in a petrified coil and would require a brawny Viking raider to lift. Or a demon.

That wail stood my hair on end, slapped me awake. It rolled toward the parking lot, swelling like some Medieval air raid klaxon. Snowflakes weren't melting on my cheeks because all the heat—all the blood—went rushing inward. That erstwhile faith in the natural universe, the rational order of reality, wouldn't be troubling me again anytime soon. Nope.

I whistled for Minerva and she leaped into the truck, riding shotgun. Her hackles were bunched. She barked her fury and terror at the night. Sleep, O blessed sleep, how I longed for thee. No time for that. We had to get gone. The Devil would be there soon.

Years ago, when I raced sled dogs for a living, I knew a fellow named Steven Graham, a disgraced lit professor from the University of Colorado. He'd gotten shitcanned for reasons opaque to my blue collar sensibilities—something to do with privileging contemporary zombie stories over the works of the Russian masters. His past was shrouded in mystery and, like a lot people, he'd fled to Alaska to reinvent himself.

Nobody on the racing circuit cared much about any of that. Graham was charming and charismatic in spades. He drank and swore with the best of us, but he'd also get three sheets to the wind and recite a bit of *Beowulf* in Olde English, and he knew the bloodlines of huskies from Balto onward. Strap a pair of snowshoes to that lanky greenhorn bastard and he'd leave even the most hardened back country trapper in the proverbial dust. All the girlies adored him, and so did the cameras. Like Cummings said, he was a hell of a handsome man.

Too good to be true.

Steven Graham got taken by the Hunt while he was running the 1992 Iditarod. That's the big winter event where men and women hook a bunch of huskies to sleds and race twelve hundred miles across Alaska from Anchorage to Nome. There's not much to say about it—it's long and grueling and lonely. You're always crossing a frozen swamp or mushing up an ice-jammed river or trudging over a mountain. It's dark and cold and mostly devoid of sound or movement but for one's own breath and the muted panting of the huskies, the jingle and clink of their traces.

Official records have it that Graham, young ex-professor and dilettante adventurer, took a wrong turn out on Norton Sound between Koyuk and Elim and went

through the ice into the sea. *Ka-sploosh*. No trace of him or the dogs was found. The Lieutenant Governor attended the funeral. CNN covered it live.

The report was bullshit, of course; I saw what really happened. And because I saw what really happened—because I meddled in the Hunt—there would be hell to pay.

Broad daylight, maybe an hour prior to sunset, mid March of 1992.

All twelve dogs in harness trotted along nicely. The end of the trail in Nome was about two days away. Things hadn't gone particularly well, and I was cruising for a middle of the pack finish and a long, destitute summer of begging corporate sponsors not to drop my underachieving ass. But damn, what a gorgeous day in the arctic: the snowpack curving around me to the horizon, the sky frozen between apple-green and steely blue, the orange ball of the sun dipping below the Earth. The effect was something out of *Fantasia*. After days of inadequate sleep I was lulled by the hiss of the sled runners, the rhythmic scrape and slap of dog paws. I dozed at the handlebars and dreamed of Sharon, the warmth of our home, a cup of real coffee, a hot shower, and the down comforter on our bed.

When my team passed through a gap in a mile-long pressure ridge that had heaved the Bering ice to an eight-foot tall parapet, the Hunt had taken down Graham on the other side, maybe twenty yards off the main drag. This I discovered when one of Graham's huskies loped toward me, free of its traces yet still in harness. The poor critter's head had been lopped at mid-neck and it zig-zagged several strides and then collapsed on the trail. You'd think my own dogs would've spooked. Instead, an atavistic switch was tripped in their doggy brains and they surged forward, yapping and howling.

Several yards to my right so much blood covered the snow I thought I was hallucinating a sunset dripped onto the ice. The scene confused me for a few seconds as my brain locked down and spun in place.

The killing ground was a fucking mess, like there'd been a mass walrus slaughter committed on the spot. Dead huskies were flung about, intestines looped over berms and piled in loose, steaming coils. Graham himself lay spread-eagled across a blue-white slab of ice repurposed as an impromptu sacrificial altar. He was split wide, eyes blank.

The Huntsman had most of the guy's hide off and was tacking it alongside the carcass as one stretches the skin of a beaver or a bear. Clad in a deerstalker hat

surmounted by antlers, a blood-drenched mackinaw coat, canvas breeches, and sealskin boots, the Huntsman stood taller than most men even as he hunched to slice Graham with a large knife of flint or obsidian—I wasn't quite close enough to discern which.

Meanwhile, the Huntsman's wolf pack ranged among the butchered huskies. These wolves were black and gaunt as cadavers; their narrow eyes glinted, reflecting the snow, the changeable heavens. When several of them reared on hind legs to study me, I decided they weren't wolves at all. Some wore olden leather and caps with splintered nubs of horn; others were garbed in the remnants of military fatigues and camouflage jackets of various styles, gore encrusted and ingrown to the creatures' hides. They grinned at me and their mouths were . . . very, very wide.

Nothing brave in what I did, or at least tried to do. My befuddled intellect was still processing the carnage when I sank the hook and tethered the team, left them baying frantically in the middle of the trail. I wasn't thinking of a damned thing as I walked stiff-legged toward the Hunt and the in-progress evisceration of my comrade. Most mushers carried firearms on the trail. There were moose to contend with and, frankly, a gun is pretty much just basic equipment in any case. We toted rifles or pistols

like folks in the lower forty-eight carry cell phones and wallets. Mine was a .357 I stowed inside my anorak to keep the cylinder from freezing into a solid lump. The revolver was in my hand and it jumped twice. I don't recall the booms. No sound, only fire. The closest pair of dog men flipped over and a small part of my mind celebrated that at least the fuckers could be hurt. It wasn't like the legends or the movies; no silver required, lead worked fine.

The Huntsman whirled when I was nearly upon him, and Jesus help me I glimpsed his face. That's probably why my hair went white that year. I squeezed the trigger three more times, emptied the gun and even as the bullets smacked him, I had the sense of shooting into an abyss—absolute hopeless, soul-draining futility. The Huntsman swayed, humungous knife raised. The blade was flint, turns out.

Worst part was, Graham blinked and looked right at me and I saw his skinned hand twitch. How he could be alive in that condition was no more or less fantastical than anything else, I suppose. Even so, even so. I still get a sick feeling in my stomach when I recall that image.

Apparently, the gods of the north had seen enough. Wind roared around us and everything went white and I was alone. Hurricane-force gusts knocked me off my feet

and I barely managed to crawl to the team, almost missed them, in fact. Visibility was maybe six feet. Easily, easily could've kept going into the featureless maelstrom until I found the lip at the edge of a bottomless gulf of open water and joined Graham, wherever he'd gone.

That storm pinned the dogs and me to Norton Sound for three days. Gusts of seventy knots. Wind chill in excess of negative one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. You wouldn't understand how cold that is. I can't describe it. It's like trying to explain how far away Alpha Centauri is from Earth in highway miles. The brain isn't equipped. Froze my right hand and foot. Froze my face so that it hardened into a black and blue mask. Froze my dick. Didn't lose anything important, but man, there are few agonies equal to thawing a frostbitten extremity.

I actually managed to cripple across the finish line. Suffering through the aftermath of physical therapy and counseling, the memory of what I'd seen out there was wiped clean from my mind with the efficacy of a kid tipping an Etch A Sketch and giving it a shake. Seven or eight years passed before the horrible event came back to haunt me, and by then it was too late to say anything, too late to be certain whether it had happened or if I'd gone round the bend.

Snow drifted both lanes and the wind buffeted the Chevy, and goddamn, but I was reliving that blizzard of '92. The fuel gauge needle fell into the red and I drove another half an hour, creeping along in four-wheel hi. Radio reception was poor and I'd settled for a static-filled broadcast of '80s rock. Hall & Oates, The Police, a block of Sade and Blue Oyster Cult, all that music our parents hated when we were bopping along in mullets.

“Godzilla” cut in and out during the drum solo, and a distorted animal growl that had nothing to do with heavy metal issued from the speakers. My name snarled over and over to the metronome of the wipers.

A truck stop glittered on the horizon of the next off ramp. Exhausted, frazzled, pissed, and afraid, I pulled alongside the pumps and got fuel. Then I hooked Minerva to a leash and brought her inside with me. She curled at my boots while I drank a quart of awful coffee and ate a New York steak with all the trimmings. The waitress didn't say anything about my bringing a pit bull to the table. Maybe the folks in Dakota were hip to that sort of thing. Didn't matter; I'd gotten the little card that proved Minerva was a service dog and of vital importance should I experience an “episode” of depression or mania.

Depression had haunted me since my retirement from mushing, and a friend who worked as counselor at the

University of Anchorage suggested that I adopt a shelter puppy and train it as a companion animal. The local police had busted a dog-fighting ring and one of the females was pregnant, so Sharon and I eventually picked Minerva from a litter of eleven. A decade later, after my world burned to the ground—career in ashes, wife gone, friends few and far between—Minerva remained steadfast. A man and his dog versus the Outer Dark.

I patted her head as we went through the door, and wished that I possessed more of her canine equanimity in the face of the unknown.

The diner was doing brisk trade. Two burly truckers in company jumpsuits occupied the next booth, but most of the customers were gathered at the counter so they could watch weather reports on TV. Nothing heartening in the reports, either. The storm would definitely delay me by half a day, possibly more. My ardent hope was that I could just bull through it and be in the clear by the time I crossed Wyoming tomorrow. I also prayed that the pickup would hang together all the way to Lamprey Isle, New York, my destination at the end of the yellow brick road. My plan was to reach the home of an old friend, the eminent crime novelist Jack Fort. Jack also happened to be a retired English professor. Jack claimed he could help. I had my doubts. The pack and its leader were

eternal and relentless. A man could plunk a few, sure. In the end, though, they simply reformed and kept pursuing. The Devil's smoke demons on the hunt.

Be that as it may, I'd decided to go down swinging, and that meant a hell-bent for leather ride into the east. Currently, my worries centered on weather and equipment. The drive from Alaska via the Alcan Highway had been rough, and I suspected the old engine was fixing to give up the ghost. I could say the same thing about my heart, my sanity, my luck.

Sure enough. Minerva snarled and bolted from her spot under the table. She crouched beside me, shivering. Foam dribbled from her jaw and her eyes bulged.

Graham strolled in, taller and happier than I remembered. Death agreed with some people. He loomed in Technicolor while reality bleached around him. His long black hair was feathered with snowflakes, and the lights hit it just right so he appeared angelic, a movie star pausing for his dramatic close-up. In his right hand, he carried the ivory hunting horn (indeed a ram's horn, albeit much more modest than its report); in his left he carried a faded cowboy hat with a crimson and black patch on the crown. He wore the Huntsman's iceberg-white mackinaw, ceremonial flint knife tucked into his belt so the bone handle jutted in a most phallic statement. He

ambled over and slid in across from me. I noticed his sealskin boots left maroon smears on the tiles. I also noticed puffs of steam escaping our mouths as the booth cooled like a meat locker.

I cocked the .357 and braced it across my thigh. “You must not be heralding the great zombie invasion. Lookin’ great, Steve. Not chalk white or anything. The rot must be on the inside.”

He flipped his hair and smirked. His trophy necklace of wedding rings, key fobs, dog tags, driver licenses, and glass eyes clinked and rattled. “Likewise, amigo. You’ve lost weight? Dyed your hair? What?”

“This and that—diet, exercise. Fleeing in terror has the bonus effect of getting a man in shape. Divorce, too. My wife used to fatten me up pretty good. Since she split . . . you know. TV dinners and Johnnie Walker. I got it going on, huh?” I gripped Minerva’s collar with my free hand. Her growls were deep and ferocious. She strained to lunge over the table, an eighty pound bowling bowl; rippling muscle and bone crushing jaws and, at the moment, bad intentions. My arm was tired already. Tempting to let my girl fly, but I loved her.

“I’m yanking your chain. You look like crap. When’s the last time you slept? There’s a motel a piece up the trail. Why not get room service, watch a porno, drink

some booze and fall into peaceful slumber? You won't even notice when I slip in there and slice your fucking throat ear to ear." Graham's smile widened. It was still him, too. Same guy I'd gotten drunk with at Nome saloons. Same perfect teeth, same easy manner, probably sincere. He'd not intimated any malice regarding his intent to skin me alive and eat my beating heart. This was business, mostly. He inclined his head slightly, as if intercepting my thought. "Not so much *business* as tradition. The Hunt is a sacred rite. I gave you the head start as a courtesy."

He was telling the truth as I understood it from my research of the legends. To witness the Hunt, to interfere with the Hunt, was to become prey. I'd wondered why the emissaries of the Horned One waited so long to come after me, especially considering the magnitude of my transgression. "Well, I reckon that was sporting of you. Twenty years. Plenty of time for Odysseus to screw his way home from the front."

"Yep, and you're almost there, too," Graham said. "Crazy ass scene on the ice, huh? Sergio Leone meets John Landis and they do it up right with razors. Man, you were totally Eastwood, six-gun blazing. Wounded the Huntsman in a serious way. Didn't kill the fucker, though. Don't flatter yourself on that score. Might be able

to smoke the hounds with regular bullets. That shit don't work so well on the Huntsman. We're of a higher order. Nah, when that storm hit, some sort of force went through me, electrified me. I tore free of that altar and jumped on the bastard's back, stuck a hunting knife into his kidney. Still wouldn't have worked except the forces of darkness were smiling on me. Grooved on my style. The Boss demoted him, awarded me the mantle and the blade, the hounds, more bitches in Hell than you can shake a stick at. I've watched you for a while, bro. Watched you lose your woman, your career, your health. You're an old, grizzled bull. No money, no family, no friends, no future. It's culling time, baby."

"Shit, you're doing me a favor! Thanks, pal!"

"Come on, don't be sarcastic. We're still buds. This is going to be super-duper painful, but no reason to make it personal. Your hide will be but one more tossed atop a mountainous pile beside a chthonic lagoon of blood and the Horned One's bone throne. The muster roll of the damned is endless, and the next name awaits my attentions."

"Okay, nothing personal. Here's the deal, since I'm the one with the hand cannon. You hold still and I'll blow your head off. Take my chances with whomever they send next. No hard feelings." I debated whether to shoot him

under the table or risk raising the gun to aim properly.

Graham laughed. “Whoa, chief. This isn’t the place. All these hapless customers, the dishwasher, the waitress, the fry cooks. That sexy waitress. If we turn this into the O-K Corral, the Boss himself will be on the case. The Horned One isn’t a kindly soul. He comes around, *everybody* gets it in the neck. Them’s the rules, I’m afraid.”

A vision splashed across the home cinema of my imagination: every person in the diner strung from the rafters by their living guts, the hounds using the corpses for piñatas and the massive, shadowy bulk of the Horned God flickering fire in the parking lot as he gazed on in infernal joy. Like as not this image was projected by Graham. I glanced out the window and spotted one of the pack, a cadaverous brute in a threadbare parka and snow pants, peeing against the wheel of a semi. In another life he’d been Bukowski or Waits, or a serial killer who rode the rails and shanked fellow hobos, a strangler of coeds, a postman. I knew him for a split second, then not. Other hounds leaped from trailer to trailer, frolicking. Too dark to make out details, except that the figures flitted and fluttered with the lithe, rubbery grace of acrobats.

I said, “Tell me, Steve. What would’ve happened to you if I hadn’t interrupted the party? Where would you be

tonight?”

He shrugged and his movie star teeth dulled to a shade of rotten ivory. “Ah, those are the sort of questions I try to let lie. The Boss frowns on us worrying about stuff above our pay grade.”

“Would you have become a hound?”

“Sometimes a damned soul gets dragged over to join the Hunt. Only the few, the proud. It’s a rare honor.”

Cold clamped on the back of my neck. “And the rest of the slobs who get taken? Where do they go after you’re done with them?”

“Not a clue, amigo. Truly an ineffable mystery.” His grin brightened again, so white, so frigid. He put on the cowboy hat. The logo was a red patch with a set of black antlers stitched in the foreground. Sign of the Horned God who was Graham’s master on the Other Side.

Minerva’s snarls and growls escalated to full-throated barks as she bristled and lunged. She’d had her fill of Mr. Death and his shark smirk. One of the truckers set down his coffee cup, pointed a thick finger at me, and said, “Hey, asshole. Shut that dog up.”

Graham’s eyes went dark, monitors tuned to deep space. A stain formed on the breast of his lily-white mackinaw. Blood dripped from his sleeve and the stink of carrion wafted from his mouth. He rose and turned and

his shoulders seemed to broaden. I caught his profile reflected in the window and something was wrong with it, although I couldn't tell what exactly. He said in a distorted, buzzing voice, "*No, you shut your mouth. Or I'll eat your tongue like a piece of Teriyaki.*"

The trucker paled and scrambled from his seat and fled the diner without a word. His buddy followed suit. They didn't grab their coats or pay the tab or anything. Other folks had twisted in their seats to view the commotion. None of them spoke, either. The waitress stood with her ticket book outthrust like a crucifix.

Graham said to them, "Hush, folks. Nothing to see here." And everyone took the hint and went back to his or her business. He nodded and faced me, smile affixed, eyes sort of normal again. "I better get along, li'l doggie. Wanted to say hi. So hi and goodbye. Gonna keep trucking east? Wait, forget I asked. Don't want to spoil the fun. See you soon, wherever that is." Yeah, he grinned, but the wintry night was a heap warmer.

"Wait," I said. "You mentioned rules. Be nice to know what they are."

"Sure, there are lots of rules. However, *you* only need to worry about one of them: run, motherfucker."

I never fully recovered from the incident in '92; not down

deep, not in the way that counts. Nightmares plagued me. Oblique, horror-show recreations as seen through the obfuscating mist of a subconscious in denial. Neither me nor the shrink could make sense of them. He put me on pills and that didn't help.

I sold the team to a Japanese millionaire and moved to the suburbs of Anchorage with Sharon, took a series of crummy labor jobs, and worked on the Great American horror novel in the evenings. She finished grad school and landed a position teaching elementary grade art. Ever fascinated with pulp classics, when the novel appeared to be a dead end I tried my hand at genre short fiction and immediately landed a few sales. By the early aughts I was doing well enough to justify quitting the construction gig and staying home to work on stories full-time.

These were supernatural horror stories, fueled by the nightmares I didn't understand, until it all came crashing in on me one afternoon during a game of winter golf with some buddies down at the beach. I keeled over on the frozen sand and was momentarily transported back to Norton Sound while my friends stood around wringing their hands. Normal folks don't know what to do around a lunatic writhing on the ground and babbling in tongues.

A week on the couch wrapped in an electric blanket and shaking with terror followed. I didn't level with

anyone—not the shrink, not Sharon or my parents, not my friends or writer colleagues. I read a piece on the Wild Hunt in an article concerning world mythology and it was like getting socked in the belly. I finally knew what had happened, if not why. All that was left was to brood.

Life went on. We tried for children without success. I have a hunch Sharon left me because I was shooting blanks. Who the fuck knows, though. Much like the Wild Hunt, the Meaning of Life, and where matching socks vanish to, her motives remain a mystery. Things seemed cozy between us; she'd always been sympathetic to my tics and twitches, and I'd tried to be a good and loving husband in return. Obviously, living with a half-crazed author took a greater toll than I'd estimated. Add screams in the night and generally paranoid behavior to the equation . . .

One day she came home early, packed her bags, and headed for Italy with a music teacher from her school. Not a single tear in her eye when she said adios to me, either. That was the same week my longtime agent, a lewd, crude alcoholic expat Brit named Stanley Jones, was indicted on numerous federal charges including embezzlement, wire fraud, and illegal alien residence. He and his lover, the obscure English horror writer Samson Marks, absconded to Mexico with my life savings, as

well as the nest eggs of several other authors. The scandal made all the industry trade rags, but the cops didn't seem overly concerned with chasing the duo.

I depended on those royalty checks as my physical condition was deteriorating. Cold weather made my bones ache. Some mornings my lumbar seized and it took twenty minutes to crawl out of bed. I hung on for a couple of years, but my situation declined. The publishing climate wasn't friendly with the recession and such. Foreclosure notices soon arrived in the mailbox.

Then, last week, Graham reappeared to put my misery into perspective.

Prior to this latter event, Jack Fort theorized that Sharon didn't run off to Italy because she was dissatisfied with the way things were going at home. Nor was it a coincidence that Jones robbed me blind and left me in the poorhouse. (Jack also employed the crook as an agent, and from what I gathered, the loss of funds contributed to his own divorce.) My friend became convinced dark forces had aligned against me in matters great and small.

Later, I told him about the Hunt and what I'd seen on the ice in 1992, how that particular chicken had come home to roost. He wasn't the least bit surprised. Unflappable Jeffrey Fort; the original drink-boiling-water-and-piss-ice-cubes guy.

The night I called him we were both drunk, and when I spilled the story of how Graham had returned from the grave and wanted to mount my head on a trophy room wall in hell, instead of expressing bewilderment or fear for my sanity, Jack just said, “Right. I figured it was something like this. From grad school onward, Graham was headed for trouble, pure and simple. He was asshole buddies with exactly the wrong type of people. Occultism is nothing to fuck with. Anyway, you’re sure it’s the Wild Hunt?”

“Graham referred to himself as the Huntsman. So. It happened almost exactly like the legends.” Granted, there were variations on the theme. Each culture has its peculiarities and so focuses on different aspects. Some versions of the Hunt mythology have Odin calling the tune. Under Odin’s yoke, the Hunt is an expression of exuberance and feral joy, a celebration of the primal. Odin’s pack travels a couple of feet off the ground. Any fool that stands in the way gets mowed like grass. See Odin coming, you grab dirt and pray the spectral procession passes overhead and keeps moving on the trail of its quarry.

The gang from Alaska seemed darker, crueller, dirtier than the storybook versions; Graham and his troops reeked of sadism and madness. That eldritch psychosis

leached from them into me, gathered in effluvial dankness in the back of my throat, lay on my tongue as a foul taint. The important details were plenty consistent—slavering hounds, feral Huntsman, a horned deity overseeing the chase, death and damnation to the prey.

Jack asked what happened and I gave him the scoop: “I was hiking along Hatcher Pass to photograph the mountain for research. Heard a god-awful racket in a nearby canyon. Howling, psycho laughter, screams. Some kind of Viking horn. I knew what was happening before I saw the pack on the summit. Knew it in my bones—the legends vary, of course. Still, the basics are damned clear whether it’s the Norwegians, Germans, or Inuit. The pack wasn’t in full chase mode or that would’ve been curtains. They wanted to scare me; makes the kill sweeter. Anyway, I beat feet. Made it to the truck and burned rubber. Graham showed up at the house later in a greasy puff of smoke, chatted with me through the door. He said I had three days to get my shit in order and then he and his boys would be after me for real.”

Jack remained quiet for a bit, except to cough a horrible, phlegmy cough—it sounded wet and entrenched as bronchitis or pneumonia. Finally he said, “Well, head east. I might be able to help you. Graham and me knew each other pretty well once upon a time when he was still

teaching, and I got some ideas what he was up to after he left Boulder. He was an adventurer, but I doubt he spent all that time in the frozen north for the thrill. Nah, my bet is he was searching for the Hunt and it found him first. Poor silly bastard.”

“Thanks, man. Although, I hate to bring this to your doorstep. Interfere in the Hunt and it’s you on the skinning board next.”

“Shut up, kid. Tend your knitting and I’ll see to mine.”

Big Jack Fort’s nonchalant reaction should’ve startled me, and under different circumstances I might’ve pondered how deep the tentacles of this particular conspiracy went. His advice appealed, though. Sure, the Huntsman wanted me to take to my heels; the chase gave him a boner. Nonetheless, I’d rather present a moving target than hang around the empty house waiting to get snuffed on the toilet or in my sleep. Graham’s flayed body glistening in the arctic twilight was branded into my psyche.

“You better step lively,” Jack warned me, in that gravelly voice of his that always sounded the same whether sober or stewed. A big dude, built square, the offspring of Raymond Burr and a grand piano. Likely he was sprawled across his couch in a tee shirt and boxers,

bottle of Maker's Mark in one paw. "Got complications on my end. Can't talk about them right now. Just haul ass and get here."

I didn't like the sound of that, nor the sound of his coughing. Despite a weakness for booze, Jack was one of the more stable guys in the business. However, he was a bit older than me and playing the role of estranged husband. Then there was the crap with Jones and dwindling book sales in general. I thought maybe he was cracking. I thought maybe we were *both* cracking.

Later that night I loaded the truck with a few essentials, including my wedding album and a handful of paperbacks I'd acquired at various literary conventions, locked the house, and lit out.

In the rearview mirror I saw Graham and three of his hounds as silhouettes on the garage roof, pinprick eyes blazing red as I drove away. It was, as the kids say, game on.

Rocketing through Indiana, "Slippery People" on the radio, darkness all around, darkness inside. The radio crackled and static erased the Talking Heads and Graham said to me, "Everybody on the lam from the Hunt feels sorry for himself. Thing of it is, amigo, you're tuned to the wrong tune. You should ask yourself, *How did I get*

here? What have I done?"

The pack raced alongside the truck. Hounds and master shimmered like starlight against the velvet backdrop, twisted like funnels of smoke. The Huntsman blew me a kiss and I tromped the accelerator and they fell off the pace. One of the hounds leaped the embankment rail and loped after me, snout pressed to the centerline. It darted into the shadows an instant before being overtaken and smooshed by a tractor trailer.

I pushed beyond exhaustion and well into the realm of zombification. The highway was a wormhole between dimensions and Graham occasionally whispered to me through the radio even though I'd hit the kill switch. And what he'd said really worked on me. What *had* I done to come to this pass? Maybe Sharon left me because I was a sonofabitch. Maybe Jones screwing me over was karma. The Wild Hunt might be a case of the universe getting Even-Steven (pardon the pun) with me. Thank the gods I didn't have a bottle of liquor handy or else I'd have spent the remainder of the long night totally blitzed and sobbing like a baby over misdeeds real and imagined. Instead, I popped the cap on a bottle of NoDoz and put the hammer down.

I parked and slept once in a turnout for a couple of hours

during the middle of the day when traffic ran thickest. I risked no more than that. The Hunt had its rules regarding the taking of prey in front of too many witnesses, but I didn't have the balls to challenge those traditions.

The Chevy died outside Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Every gauge went crazy and plumes of steam boiled from the radiator. I got the rig towed to a salvage yard and transferred Minerva and my meager belongings to a compact rental. We were back on the road before breakfast, and late afternoon saw us aboard the ferry from Port Sanger, New York, to Lamprey Isle.

What to say about LI West (as Jack referred to it)? Nineteen miles north to south and about half that at its widest, the whole curved into a malformed crescent, the Man in the Moon's visage peeled from Luna and partially submerged in the Atlantic. Its rocky shore was sculpted by the clash of wind and sea; a forest of pine, maple, and oak spanned the interior. Home of hoot owls and red squirrels; good deer hunting along the secret winding trails, I'd heard. Native burial mounds and mysterious megaliths, I'd also heard.

The main population center, Lamprey Township (pop. 2201), nestled in a cove on the southwestern tip of the island. Jack had mentioned that the town had been established as a fishing village in the early nineteenth

century; prior to that, smugglers and slavers made it their refuge from privateers and local authorities. A den of illicit gambling and sodomy, I'd heard. Allegedly, the name arose from a vicious species of eels that infested the local waters. Long as a man's arm, the locals claimed.

Lamprey Township was a fog-shrouded settlement hemmed by the cove and spearhead shoals, a picket of evergreens. A gloomy cathedral fortress reared atop a cliff streaked with seagull shit and pocked by cave entrances. Lovers Leap. In town, everybody wore flannel and rain slickers, boots and sock caps. A folding knife and mackinaw crowd. Everything was covered in salt rime, everything tasted of brine. Piloting the rental down Main Street between boardwalks, compartment of the car flushed with soft blue-red lights reflecting from the ocean, I thought this wouldn't be such a bad place to die. Release my essential salts back into the primordial cradle.

Jack's cabin lay inland at the far end of a dirt spur. Built in the same era as the founding of Lamprey Township, he'd bought it from Katarina Veniti, a paranormal romance author who'd become jaded with all of the tourists and yuppies moving onto "her" island during the last recession. A stone and timber longhouse with ye old-fashioned shingles and moss on the roof surrounded by an acre of sloping yard overgrown with

tall, dead grass. An oak had uprooted during a recent windstorm and toppled across the drive.

Minerva and I hoofed it the last quarter of a mile. The faceless moon dripped and shone through scudding clouds and a vault of branches. The house sat in darkness except for a light shining from the kitchen window.

“Welcome to Kat’s island,” Jack said, and coughed. He reclined in the shadows on a porch swing. Moonlight glinted from the bottle in his hand, the barrel of the pump-action shotgun across his knees. He wore a wool coat, dock-worker’s cap snug over his brow, wool pants, and lace-up hiking boots. When he stood to shake my hand, I realized his clothes hung loose as sails, that he was frail and shaky.

“Jesus, man,” I said, shaken at the sight of him. He appeared more of an apparition than the bona fide spirit pursuing me. I understood why he didn’t mind the idea of the Hunt invading his happy home. The man was so emaciated he should’ve been hanging near the blackboard in science class; a hundred pounds lighter since I’d last seen him, easy. He’d shaved his head and beard to gray stubble; his pallid flesh was dry and hot, his eyes sparkled like bits of quartz. He stank of gun oil, smoke, and rotting fruit.

“Yeah. The big C. Doc hit me with the bad news this

spring. Deathwatch around the Fort. I sent the pets to live with my sister.” He smiled and gestured at the woods. “Just you, me, and the trees. I got nothing better to do than help an old pal in his hour of need.” He led the way inside. The kitchen was cheerily lighted, and we took residence at the dining table where he poured me a glass of whiskey and listened to my recap of the trip from Alaska.

“I hope you’ve got a plan,” I said.

“Besides blasting them with grandma’s twelve gauge?” He patted the stock of his shotgun where it lay on the table. “We’re going out like a pair of Vikings.”

“I’d be more excited if you had a flamethrower, or some grenades.”

“Me too. Me too. I got a few sticks of dynamite for fishing and plenty of ammo.”

“Dynamite is good. This is going to be full on Hollywood. Fast cars, shirtless women, explosions . . .”

“Man, I don’t even know if it’ll detonate. The shit’s been stashed in a leaky box in the cellar for a hundred years. Honestly, my estimation is, we’re hosed. Totally up shit creek. Our sole advantage is prey doesn’t usually fight back. Graham’s powerful, he’s a spirit, or a monster, whatever. But he’s new on the job, right? That may be our ray of sunshine. That, and according to the literature, the

Pack doesn't fancy crossing large bodies of open water. These haunts prefer ice and snow." Jack coughed into a handkerchief. Belly-ripping, Doc Holliday kind of coughing. He wiped his mouth and had a belt of whiskey. His cheeks were blotched. "Anyway, I brought you here for another reason. This house belonged to a sorcerer once upon a time. Type they used to burn at the stake. An unsavory guy named Ewers Welloc. The Wellocs own most of this island and there's a hell of a story in that. For now, let me say Ewers was blackest in a family of black sheep. The villagers were scared shitless of him, were convinced he practiced necromancy and other dark arts on the property. Considering the stories Kat told me and some of the funky stuff I've found stashed around here, it's hard to dismiss the villagers claims as superstition."

I could only wonder what he'd unearthed, or Kat before him. Jack bought the place for a dollar and suddenly that factoid assumed ominous significance. "What were you guys up to? You, Kat, and Graham attended college together. Did you form a club?"

"A witch coven. I kid, I kid. Wasn't college . . . We met at the Sugar Tree Hill writers' retreat. Five days of sun, fun, booze, and hand jobs. There were quite a few young authors there who went on to become quasi-prominent. Many a friendship and enmity are formed at

Sugar Tree Hill. The three of us really clicked. Me and Kat were wild, man, wild. Nothing on Graham's scale, though. He took it way farther. As you can see."

"Yeah." I sipped my drink.

"Me and Graham were pretty tight until he schlepped to Alaska and started in with the sled dogs.

Communication tapered off and after a while we fell out of touch. I received a few letters. Guy had the world's shittiest penmanship; would've taken a cryptologist to have deciphered them. I thought he suffered from cabin fever."

"Seemed okay to me," I said. "Gregarious. Popular. Handsome. He was well-regarded."

"Yeah, yeah . . . The rot was on the inside," Jack said and I almost spilled my glass. He didn't notice. "As it happens, my hole card is an ace. Lamprey Isle was settled long before the whites landed. Maybe before the Mohawk, Mohican, Seneca. Nobody knows who these people were, but none of the records are flattering. This mystery tribe left megaliths and cairns on islands and along the coast. A few of those megaliths are in the woods around here. Legend has it that the tribe erected them for use in necromantic rituals. Summon, bind, banish. Like Robert Howard hypothesized in his Conan tales—if the demonic manifests on the mortal plane, it

becomes subject to the laws of physics, and cold Hyperborean steel. Howard was onto something.”

“Fairy rocks, huh?” I said. The whiskey was hitting me.

“Got any problem believing in the Grim Reaper with a hunting knife and a pack of werewolves chasing you from one end of the continent to the other?”

I tried again. “So. Fairy rocks.”

“Fuckin’ A, boy-o. Fairy rocks. And double aught buckshot.”

We took shifts at watch until dawn. The Hunt didn’t arrive and so passed a peaceful evening. I slept for three hours; the most I’d had in a week. Jack fried bacon and eggs for breakfast and we drank a pot of black coffee. Afterward he gave me a tour of the house and the immediate grounds. Much of the house gathered dust, exuding the vibe particular to dwellings of bachelors and widowers. Since his wife flew the coop, Jack’s remit had contracted to kitchen, bath, living room. Too close to a tomb for my liking.

Tromping around the property with our breath streaming slantwise, he showed me a megalith hidden in the underbrush between a pair of sugar maples. Huge and misshapen beneath layers of slime and moss, the stone

cast a shadow over us. It radiated the chill of an ice block. One of several in the vicinity, I soon learned.

Jack wasn't eager to hang around it. "There were lots of animal bones piled in the bushes. You'll never catch any animals living here. Wasn't the two decks of Camels I smoked every day since junior high that gave me cancer. It's these damned things. Near as I can figure, they're siphons. Let's pray the effect is magnified upon extra-dimensional beings. Otherwise, Graham will just eat our bullets and spit them back at us."

The megalith frightened me. I imagined it as a huge, predatory insect disguised as a stone, its ethereal rostrum stabbing an artery and sucking my life essence. I wondered if the stones were indigenous, or if the ancient tribes had fashioned them somehow. I'd never know. "Graham's an occultist. Think he's dumb enough to walk into a trap?"

"Graham ain't Graham anymore. He's the Huntsman." Jack scanned the red-gold horizon and muttered dire predictions of another storm front descending from the west. "Trouble headed this way," he said and hustled me back to the house. We locked and shuttered everything and took positions in the living room; Jack with his rifle, me with my pistol and dog. Seated on the leather Italian sofa, bolstered by a pitcher of

vodka and lemonade, we watched ancient episodes of *The Rockford Files* and *Ironside* and waited.

Several minutes past two p.m., the air dimmed to velvety purple and the trees behind the house thrashed and rain spattered the windows. The power died. I whistled a few bars of the *Twilight Zone* theme, shifted the pistol into my shooting hand.

Jack grinned and went to the window and stood there, a blue shadow limned in black. The booze in my tumbler quivered and the horn bellowed, right on top of us. Glass exploded and I was bleeding from the head and both hands that I'd raised to protect my face. Wood splintered and doors caved in all over the house and the hounds rolled into the living room; long, sinuous figures of pure malevolence with ruby-bright eyes, low to the floor and moving fast, teeth, tongues, appetite. I squinted and fired twice from the hip, and a bounding figure jerked short. Minerva pounced, snarling and tearing in frenzy, doggy mind reverting to the swamps and jungles and caves of her ancestors. Jack's shotgun blazed a stroke of yellow flame and sheared the arm of a fiend who'd scuttled in close. Partially deafened and blinded, I couldn't keep track of much after that. Squeezed the trigger four more times, popped the speed loader with six fresh slugs, kept firing at shadows that leaped and sprang. The Riders of

the Apocalypse and Friends galloped through the house—our own private Armageddon. More glass whirled, and bits of wood and shreds of drapery; a section of ceiling collapsed in a cascade of sparks and rapidly blooming white carnations of drywall dust. Now the gods could watch.

Thunder of gunshots, Minerva growling, the damned, yodeling cries of the hounds, and crackling bones, wound around my brain in a knotted spool. I got knocked down in the melee and watched Minerva swing past, lazily flying, paws limp, guts raveling behind her. I'd owned many dogs, but Minerva was my first and only pet, my dearest friend. She was a mewling puppy once more, then inert bone and slack hide, and gone, gone, the last pinprick of my life snuffed.

Something was on fire. Oily black smoke seethed through a vertical impact crater where the far wall had stood. Moon, clouds, and smoke boiled there. A couple of fingers were missing from my left hand. Blood pulsed forth: a shiny, crimson bouquet thickening into a lump at the end of my wrist, a wax sculpture from the house of horrors, an object example of Medieval torture. It didn't hurt. Didn't feel like anything. My jacket had been sliced, and the flesh beneath it, so that my innards glistened in the cold air. That didn't hurt either. Instead, I was buoyed

by a feral joy. This wouldn't take much longer by the looks of it. I pulled the jacket closed as best I could and began the laborious process of standing. Almost done, almost home.

Jack cursed through a mouthful of dirt. The Huntsman had entered the fray and caught his skull in one splayed hand. He sawed through Jack's throat with that jagged flint dagger hewn from Stone Age crystal. The Huntsman sawed with so much vigor that Jack's limbs flopped crazily, a crash test dummy at the moment of impact. Graham let Jack's carcass thump to the sodden carpet among the savaged bodies of the pack. He pointed at me, him playing the lead man of a rock band shouting out to his audience. Yeah, the gods were with us, and no doubt.

“So, we meet again.” He chuckled and licked his lips and wiped the Satan knife against his gory mackinaw. He approached, shuffling like a seal through the smoldering gloom, lighted by an inner radiance that bathed him in a weird, pale glow as cold and alien as the Aurora Borealis. The death-light of Hades, presumably. His eyes were hidden by the brim of his hat, but his smile curved, joyless and cruel.

I made it to my feet and scrambled backward over the flaming wreckage of coffee tables and easy chairs, the upended couch, and into the hall. Blood came from me in

ropes, in sheets. Graham followed, smiling, smiling. Doorframes buckled as his shoulders brushed them. He swiped the knife in a loose and easy diamond pattern. The knife hissed as it rehearsed my evisceration. I wasn't worried about that. I was long past worry. Thoughts of vengeance dominated.

“You killed my dog.” Blood bubbles plopped from my lips, and that's never good. Another dose of ferocious, joyful melancholy spurred me onward. I pitched the empty revolver at his head, watched the gun glance aside and spin away. My tears froze to salt on my cheeks. Arctic ice groaned beneath my boots as the sea swelled, yearned toward the moon. The sea drained the warmth from me, taking back what it had given.

“*You* killed your dog, mon frère. You did for our buddy Jack, too. Bringing me and my boys here like this. Don't beat yourself up. It's a volunteer army, right?”

I turned away, sliding, overbalancing. My legs folded and I slumped before a fallen timber, its charred length licked by small flames. The blood from my ruined hand sizzled and spat. I rubbed my face against the floor, painting myself a war mask of gore and charcoal. By the time he'd crossed the gap between us and seized my hair to flip me onto my back, at the precise moment he sank the blade into my chest, the fuse on the glycerin-wet stick

of dynamite was a nub disappearing into its burrow.

Graham's exultant expression changed. "Well, I forgot Jack was a fisherman," he said. That fucking knife kept traveling, the irresistible force, and I embraced it, and him.

The Eternal Footman clapped, once.

After an eon of vectoring through infinite night, the door to the tilt-a-whirl opened and I plummeted and hit the earth hard enough to raise dust. Mud instead. An angelic choir serenaded me from stage left, beyond a screen of tall trees and fog. Wagner as interpreted by Homer's sirens. The voices rose and fell, sweetly demanding my blood, the heat of my bones. That sounded fine; I imagined the soft, red lips parted, imagined that they glowed as the Huntsman glowed, but as an expression of erotic passion rather than malice, and I longed to open a vein for them.

I came to, paralyzed. Pieces of me lay scattered across the backyard. Probably for the best that I couldn't turn my neck to properly survey the damage.

Graham sprawled across from me, face-down in the wet leaves. Wisps of smoke curled from him. He shuddered violently and lifted his head. Bones and joints snapped into place again. The left eye shimmered with reflections of fire. The right eye was black. Neither were

human.

He said, “Are you dead? Are you dead? Or are you playing possum? I think you’re mostly dead. It doesn’t matter. Hell is come as you are.” He shook himself and began to crawl in my direction, slithering with a horrible serpent-like elasticity.

Mostly dead must’ve meant 99.9 percent dead, because I couldn’t even blink, much less raise a hand to forestall his taking my skull for the mantle, my soul to the bad place. A red haze obscured my vision and the world receded. The sirens in the forest called again, louder yet. Graham hesitated, his glance drawn to the voices that came from many directions now and sang in many languages.

Jack staggered from the smoking ruins of the house. He appeared to have been dunked in a vat of blood. He held his shotgun in a death grip. “The bell tolls for you, Stevie,” he said and blew off Graham’s left leg. He racked the slide and blasted Graham’s right leg to smithereens below the kneecap. Graham screamed and whipped around and tried to hamstring his tormentor. Not quite fast enough. Jack proved agile for an old guy with a slit throat.

The siren choir screamed in pleasure. *Blam! Blam!* Graham’s hands went bye-bye. The next slug severed his

spine, judging by the ragdoll effect. His body went limp and he screamed, and I'm sure he would've happily leaped on Jack and eaten him alive if Jack hadn't already dismembered him with some fancy shotgun work. Jack said something I didn't catch. Might've uttered a curse in a foreign tongue . . . then stuck the barrel under Graham's chin and took his head off with the last round.

I cheered telepathically. Then I finished dying. The score as the curtains closed was lovely, lovely.

This time I emerged from eternal night to Minerva kissing my face. I was lying on my back in the kitchen. There was a hole in the ceiling and gray daylight poured through along with steady trickles of water from busted pipes.

Jack slouched at the table, which was stacked with various odds and ends. His shoulders were wide and round as boulders and he'd gained back all the weight cancer had stolen. He clutched a bottle of Old Crow and watched me intently. He said, "Stay away from the light, kid. It's fire and lava."

I spat clotted blood. Finally, I said, "He's dead?"

"Again."

"Singing . . ." I managed.

"Oh, yeah. Don't listen. That's just the vampire stones. They're fat on Graham's energy."

“How’d I get in here?”

“I dragged you by your hair.”

The world kept solidifying around me, and my senses along with it. Me, Minerva, and Jack being alive didn’t compute. Except, as the cobwebs cleared from my mind, it made a sinister kind of sense. I laid my hand on Minerva’s fur and noticed the red sparks in her eyes, how goddamned long and white her teeth were. “Oh, shit,” I said.

“Yeah,” Jack said. He set aside the bottle and shrugged into the Huntsman’s impeccable snow white mackinaw. Perfect fit. Next came the Huntsman’s hat. Different on Jack; broader and of a style I didn’t recognize. The red and black crest was gone. Real antlers in its stead. A shadow crossed his expression and the light in the room gathered in his eyes. “Get up,” he said.

And I did. Not a mark on me. I felt quite alive for a dead man. Hideous strength coursed through my limbs. I thought of my philandering ex-wife, her music teacher beau, and hideous thoughts coursed through my mind. I must’ve retained a tiny fragment of humanity because I managed to look away from that vista of terrible and splendid vengeance. For the moment, at least. I said, “Where now?”

Jack leaned on a broad, barbed spear that had

replaced his emptied shotgun. “There’s this guy in Mexico I’d like to visit,” he said. He handed me the flint knife and the herald’s horn. “Do the honors, kid.”

“Oh, Stanley. It’ll be good to see you again.” I pressed the horn to my lips and winded it, once. The kitchen wall disintegrated and the shockwave traveled swiftly, rippling grass and causing birds to lift in panic from the trees. I imagined Stanley Jones, somewhere far to the south, seated on his veranda, tequila at hand, American newspaper balanced on his rickety knee, ear cocked, straining to divine the origin of dim bellow carried by the wind.

Minerva bayed. She gathered her sleek, killing bulk and hurtled across the yard and into the woods.

I patted the hilt of the knife and followed her.

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Laird Barron is the author of several books, including the short story collections *The Imago Sequence* and *Occultation*, and the novel *The Croning*. His work has appeared in many magazines and anthologies, including *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Inferno*, *Lovecraft Unbound*, *Sci Fiction*, *Supernatural Noir*, *The Book of Cthulhu*, *Creatures*, *The Year’s Best Fantasy & Horror*, and *Best Horror of the Year*. He is a three-time winner of the Shirley Jackson Award, and a three-time finalist for the Stoker Award. His work has also been nominated for the Crawford, World Fantasy, International Horror Guild, and Locus awards.

Good Fences

Genevieve Valentine

He thinks at first the streetlight's back on, but of course not. It's been dark six weeks. There are already beer bottles piled on the sidewalk every morning from the dropout teenagers who surge in whenever there's the littlest pool of darkness they can find, and then they smoke and drink and shout all night right under his window when he's trying to sleep.

He looks out the window a little sidelong, just in case the high-school kids are down there.

They're not. The street's empty, except for the car on fire.

It's on his side of the street; the fire's still just a glow through the front windshield, shifting shadows. Cozy, almost.

He wonders whose car it is.

Then he starts to get nervous. What if it explodes? What if the fire catches and every car on the street lights up? What if the maple burns down? (The maple is the only thing that filters the smoke from the teenagers.)

He debates calling the police, but he can guess the trouble that would get him in. Anonymous tips aren't

anonymous, everybody knows that. Especially not in this neighborhood.

He imagines them showing up at his door, asking how he knew to call in the fire. Asking him if anyone can verify that he was home. He'll probably end up spending his whole night at the station under suspicion, and then he'll show up at work like a zombie.

It's none of his business.

It's one of those punks anyway, probably—some private fight between two dropouts with nothing better to do at night than throw lit cigarettes through the sunroof of a car until it goes up.

He *can't wait* until the cops come. Then those kids will be in for it.

(Maybe it was the owner of the car, doing it for the money. That happens. Insurance companies have a whole fraud division to deal with it.)

The cops will figure it out. Better not to get involved.

An hour later he looks out his window to see if any of the kids are back. Taking pictures, maybe. Maybe one of them feels guilty and has come out to take some responsibility.

Of course nobody's bothered to come. This neighborhood is going to hell.

He goes back to his book, keeps one ear out for the moment of ignition, when the car will blow and take out half the other cars on the block, and then the cops will show up and those kids will be sorry they were playing around with other people's property.

It doesn't explode. He sits up half the night waiting for nothing.

The next morning, he's late getting up—of course he's late, the fire kept him up all night, mainlining coffee just to stay awake in case the fire spread and threatened the maple.

It didn't. It just burned out slowly, rolling for a long time behind smoky windows, almost too quiet to hear, and then with some little screeches and bangs as the windows shattered and the car curled in at the edges.

The cops never came.

(He has to find a new neighborhood.)

On his way to work he passes the shell. He risks one glance, disinterested, the kind of look anyone would give the skeleton of a wrecked car they were seeing for the first time.

The headlights are still there, but most of the windows are long gone, like the eyes have been ground out of a body; the inside is a ruin, just lumps and

shadows he doesn't want to look at for long.

He drops his head and passes by; there's a crunch under his feet, and a spray of black ashes and glittering glass across the sidewalk ahead of him.

He walks as quickly as he can without knocking any of it into his shoes.

He doesn't look again. The last thing he needs is to be accused of inspecting his handiwork.

There's a pang in his stomach. Too much coffee.

At work, Peter is already in their cube, and as soon as he comes in, Peter looks up and says, "Jesus, Alan, you look like hell."

"I was up half the night," he says. "Some kids let a car burn up on my block."

Peter whistles through his teeth. "Your place is seriously shady, man."

He doesn't argue.

He takes the window seat on the bus home.

(He likes window seats. His commute is ninety minutes, and Peter fucked him over with paperwork he's carrying home. It gives him something to do.)

The bus rounds the corner, and he sees a glimpse of white in a third floor window. An old man in a button-

down is edging toward the window, one arm out to brace him against the windowsill as soon as he reaches it. His face is wrinkled and set, and somehow he looks like he hasn't talked to anyone in a long time.

Jesus, he thinks. For a second his hands get so heavy he thinks they're going to crush his legs.

But the moment passes. Sometimes he's a sucker, is all.

He can't worry about strangers for the rest of his life. He has a briefcase full of paperwork; he has his own problems.

For two days he thinks someone will do something about the car.

But every day the car's still there, still not towed or marked by police. Cars are parked in front of it, behind it, closer than he'd ever get to a car that looks as terrible as this one. Some people can't see trouble when it's looking right at them.

By the second day, Mrs. Christensen must have swept away the glass that was in front of her house—there are streaks of dark gray where the ashes have been ground to the pavement—but the shards just past her property line sit untouched, edges up.

Good fences make good neighbors, but for a second,

the hair on his neck stands up.

(Is it a message? Did she see him watching the night it burned? What is she waiting for, then?)

But it's nothing. He gives people too much credit. She's probably pretended she didn't see the car at all. She's not the type of neighbor to put herself out.

He gets home late. (Peter went to a meeting and never came back, and somebody had to close the month, so here he is, at ten at night.)

The teenagers aren't under the broken streetlight. He might be able to get to sleep before midnight once he tackles work.

The car is still there. One of the tires has blown; it looks drunk, half-lurching its way out of the street.

He should be so lucky.

He closes the door behind him, locks it twice.

As he sits down at his desk there are little sounds that bother him, like someone outside is scratching a chalkboard half an inch at a time.

He doesn't check. He has work.

He's so tired that he can't stop the shakes he gets after his second cup of coffee. (He gets this way sometimes when people assign him an unfair workload. He knows the signs. It's out of his control.)

At midnight, there's a metallic thud on the street outside.

The dropouts have knocked over the streetlight is the first thing he thinks, but when he gets to the window nothing's there, and he realizes that something must have fallen out of the car.

Of course that's what the noises were. What other problem is as awful as this one?

Only the headlights give away that there's a car there at all. They're still bright and clear, untouched by all the fire, and even without the streetlight they're right where he thinks they are, as soon as he looks out the window.

It must have been something dropping out from underneath the car. The outside of it looks the same—the roof swollen like a boil, a lump of melted trash in the backseat, the windows with a few jagged fingers left clawing at the empty centers, the scorched paint job so flat that it's invisible in the dark, vanished like a secret just for him.

He doesn't know how he knows what the rest of the car even looks like. The streetlight's still out. It's not like he's been looking at it. That car is the last thing he wants to see.

He pulls the curtains shut.

Around midnight, he wakes up from a dream that he called the cops. One hand's already fumbling for the phone.

(He laughs, when he has himself together. What sort of phone call was he planning to make?

“Yeah, hi, a car burned up over the weekend and I didn't do anything then, but the teenagers aren't under the streetlight any more and I think the car is staring at me, so can you tow it?”)

But the longer he thinks about it, the more unfair it gets. Where the hell is the person this car belonged to? Wouldn't someone have noticed by now that his transportation habits have been suddenly and violently altered? Hasn't anyone on the street clued him in?

Hasn't anybody said anything?

When he looks out his window, he sees the scorched-out roof, the half-melted grill like a grimace, the headlights gleaming like eyes.

The car's still there in the morning.

All day he thinks about it—knocking on some doors in his building, or even talking to Mrs. Christensen.

(“Forget it,” says Peter when he brings it up. “Too late now. You'll just be the twitchy asshole who's way too interested in the burned-up car. I'd call the cops on

you if you knocked on my door. Where the hell is the P&L I gave you?”)

Still, he thinks about it, on and off.

It's not worth it—Peter's right, and besides, his neighborhood is full of creeps, it would probably just end with him in a fight about insurance fraud with the asshole who lit up his own car—but he just wants someone to fucking take care of it already.

On the bus, he's going over invoices, and he looks up too late to see if the old man's in the window again.

Probably was. Things are always happening to make him feel badly.

When he turns the corner for home and sees that the car is still there, his stomach sinks.

(He'd hoped for better, from somebody.)

On his way up the street, he passes Mrs. Christensen. She's raking leaves with her eyes on the ground.

He's so angry he nearly asks her about it—he opens his mouth to say, “So, am I the only one who can see this fucking car?”

(He could swear it's a foot closer to his building. He could swear the tires are blown on the opposite side now, like it really is moving, like it saw him coming and is

crawling to reach him like a dog.

Jesus Christ, he's shaking.)

But the words won't go past his throat, so he just coughs and keeps his gaze on his feet as he walks, and tries to take comfort that he's not the only one who can't bring himself to look at it.

At some point after, the television is nothing but infomercials, he gives up on sleep and settles by the window.

The car is the only other thing that's awake. Might as well have company.

It's a lovely night, cool and clear, and he's not surprised when two of the high-schoolers appear as if by magic in the flare of a cigarette lighter.

(I knew it, he thinks. I knew it, you little fucks.)

They pass a cigarette back and forth, talking just low enough that he can't hear what they're saying. They don't look at the car, not even a glance over. How can they be so casual about what they did?

One of the boys takes the cigarette and shoves the other, dances away with a laugh. He's never understood what's so funny about that stuff that you have to go wake your neighbors playing around about nothing.

The second boy swings for a punch and misses, and

the dropout with the cigarette laughs again, pretending to smother it in his sleeve, but the sound echoes off the walls in the apartment.

He wishes this kid had burned up in the car, just to shut him up.

The kid looks up and sees him.

(He doesn't know how, it's dark outside and it's dark in the apartment, but he can still see the car, so maybe it's just never as dark as you think.)

The kid gets a weird look on his face, and reaches for his friend without looking behind him, so now the other one's looking at him, too.

He doesn't move. He's a citizen worried about vandalism. They should be afraid of him, after what they did.

They edge away from the building, down the street and past his line of sight, and then he hears two pairs of footsteps running.

The carcass was facing them, too, and just for a second one of the headlights disappears, like a shadow moved across it, or it moved.

Peter goes to lunch with the Project Manager without telling him.

His own P&L is still sitting on the copier, where Peter

fucking copied it to take to lunch to show off and forgot to cover his ass and put it back.

Maybe he didn't forget. Maybe Peter just figures that he's invisible, and knows he won't say anything.

Maybe Peter figures he doesn't have the spine; he doesn't have the balls to call the cops and tell them Peter burnt out a car on his street and to come talk to him about it, just so some uniforms would come in and scare some respect back into Peter.

At least then the cops would know that the car was there. After that it wouldn't matter what happened—Peter would be innocent, that was fine, he didn't need Peter to go to jail. Just so long as he could make someone else see the car and tell him what happened.

(He sits with the phone in his hand for three minutes, trying to work up the courage.)

For lunch he buys a greasy burger, garlic fries, and a newspaper. He's going to sit in the cube by himself, stink the place up, and read the entire fucking paper, no matter how long it takes, just so that whenever Peter gets back, he can see how little he cares about the shit that Peter's pulled.

He skims, mostly, because the sports section goes on forever and world policy is kind of depressing.

It's an accident that he sees the obituary at all.

The man in the photo is a stranger, but he pauses and looks at the face for a long time.

Then he looks at the date of birth, the address.

It's the old man from the window.

The face is twenty or thirty years younger in this picture, but he knows. The eyes are the same, and that jowly face is the same, even from a window three floors up.

It doesn't say how he died.

(Jesus, he thinks, please say it's not jumping.)

There's nothing about who he's survived by.

It doesn't mean he died alone. People leave things out of obituaries all the time.

He throws the burger away.

He wakes up from a nightmare (fire everywhere, he wakes up gasping, someone needs to get this car off the street or he's never going to get to sleep again).

As soon as he can breathe, he runs to the window to make sure the maple's all right.

The roof of the car has fallen in. The sound must have woken him.

It collapsed so completely that there's no sharp edges left, no tears where the metal held on. It looks like

someone lifted it out clean—it's just gone.

Now he can look right into the back seat of the car, at the thing he's never brought himself to really look at.

The body.

It's curled in the backseat of the car, cocooned in the shell of the headrests that melted across it to protect it from falling to pieces. The streetlight's still blown out—it's too dark to see anything, unless you know what you're afraid to see—but he can make out the line of a spindly arm, the curve of a hand, an arch that must have been a leg, laid out across the back of the beast, and even in the pitch black he knows the body's there.

It's bone-pale, now, burned out to ashes.

(Its mouth is open; he can see it from here. That man died alone and screaming.)

And no one's called the cops, in all this time. No one's said a thing. They left it for him to find, because they knew, they knew what he'd be finding now.

(Or they hadn't seen it, not one thing, and he's the only guy awake and gripping the windowsill until his knuckles pop.)

He wonders what those dropouts will say when they show up tonight to drink and smoke and see that the car isn't hiding their secret any more.

Maybe it was one of them who died in there, he

thinks. It makes it a fraction easier to breathe, thinking of the body in that car being one of them, thinking of them having to really look at that car, with the spine arching up from inside it, and be fucking sorry for what they did. That's better than anything else he can come up with.

It's ashes now, anyway. Too late to do anything. The dead are dead.

(Survived by, he thinks, before he can help himself.)

He closes the window tightly and pulls the curtains shut so the street noise is muffled and he can get some sleep.

It's almost midnight, and he has work in the morning.

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Genevieve Valentine is the author of the novel, *Mechanique: a Tale of the Circus Tresaulti*. Her short fiction has appeared in or is forthcoming in magazines such as *Lightspeed*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Escape Pod*, and in many anthologies, including *Armored*, *Under the Moons of Mars*, *Running with the Pack*, *The Living Dead 2*, *The Way of the Wizard*, *Federations*, *Teeth*, and *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*. Her writing has been nominated for the World Fantasy Award, the Nebula Award, and the Shirley Jackson Award.

Afterlife

Sarah Langan

Mary Hogan wrote the word *Afterlife* in red chalk while the children whispered. There was an urgency to their words, like spoken prayers.

“Now, now. Pay attention.” Mary’s prim voice bounced against the dusty attic walls. She was forty-five years old. The time was now. The place was her mother’s townhouse in Astoria, Queens, from which she’d soon be evicted. Magic lived here. So did monsters.

Mary pointed at what she’d written. “Who knows what this means?”

Light spilled through the triangle-shaped windows, splashing against the blackboard. Outside, an ice cream truck trundled down 48th Street to the tune of *London Bridge*. None of the children spoke, not even little Oscar Knisely.

Mary pushed her black, dime store bifocals to the back of her nose. “Afterlife is existence after death. And you are all dead.”

The kids faded inside their seats. Their seven bodies turned translucent. Mary pointed again at her lesson. This was a disturbed group. Recalcitrants, every one of them.

“You’re dead,” Mary repeated.

The blackboard yawned. Its center opened, bunching Mary’s red-chalk lesson along its round edges. The sound was a knife-sharp fan, whipping around and around.

“This house is Limbo. The longer you stay, the more you fade, until you don’t exist anymore. You have to cross to the other side. It’s the only way out.”

Laughter burst from the front row. Desks overturned, one after the next. All seven lay in a heap on the creaky wooden floor.

Mary kept pointing. She was getting careless, obviously, because her index finger grazed the black deep of the portal, cold as dry ice. “Go. Your mommies and daddies are waiting.”

The desks went airborne, chasing each other like a runaway carousel. She imagined the kids inside them, smiling with maniacal glee.

“Stop,” Mary hollered, kneeling below the blackboard, her hands pressed over her glasses so that just a sliver of hazel eye peeked out.

The circle slowed. The chairs lined up. They took a running start, then slammed into the blackboard: *bang!* *Bang! BANG!* Slate and desks rained. The entire attic shook. Hundred-year-old wood joists groaned.

Mary stood. Her glasses, somehow, had cracked.

Seven ghost children who'd died without grace reappeared. *We are not dead*, they mouthed in unison.

For dinner that Tuesday night, Mary fried a shell steak in A.1. sauce with boiled potatoes on the side. She had to climb over about three hundred copies of *National Geographic* just to get to the stove. Her mother Corinne was a hoarder. The kind that pressed aluminum foil flat and remembered that the bit with the red mark once contained red velvet cupcakes while the bit with the black mark on the shiny side came from a bottle of Manischewitz. Over the years, she'd jammed their house with so much crap that they each wore their toilet paper on their arms; otherwise they'd never find it when they needed it.

Corinne Hogan's crazy had passed for eccentricity until the Dollar Store on 39th Avenue failed. Corrine took it hard. First her husband left her for the floozy across the street, then the family business collapsed. They'd stored the stock in the basement: tea towels, singing mechanical birds, Christmas tree-shaped erasers, Hello Kitty staplers, fluorescent highlighter pens, sparkly party hats. But slowly, over that dark year in 1992, the crap washed ashore. It climbed the steps, then spread through the hall. Corrine stopped throwing things away, and started

tweezing through the curbside rubbish in front of the floozy's house. She collected used hair dryers and discarded photo albums. Tampon boxes and broken lamps. The crap crashed like a wave into the kitchen and dining room and den.

The way Mary remembered it, the hoarding started on a single night in 1992. She and Corrine were watching local news when the Pope came on and announced that Limbo was closed for business. From now on, all children went straight to heaven.

“I wish I was the Virgin Mary,” twenty-four year-old Mary had announced. “Then I'd have a baby and a husband, and when I died, my body wouldn't get old. I'd just transcend straight to heaven.”

Corrine got up right then and started sorting Dollar Store stock. Pretty soon, the mess spread. By the end of the month, the Hogans were full-on hoarders. The only place the crap didn't cram was Mary's bedroom and the attic, whose steps were too steep for Corrine to summit.

That night of the catechism, Mary went up to the attic to think about sex and heaven and getting out from under her mother's thumb—all the wants in her life that squeezed her heart tight. And then a ghost girl came out from the eaves. She wore tube socks and a halter dress and she'd died in 1979 from an asthma attack. The two of

them had talked about all kinds of things, like the television show *Bewitched* and hot Starbuck from *Battlestar Galactica*. Then the portal opened up. Together, they'd figured out that it was her salvation. The girl had waved on her way through, and in that moment, Mary had wished she could go, too.

From that day forward, the women of 48th Street found their callings: Corrine the hoarder, Mary the teacher. For Mary and her ghosts, the first years were easy, but over time, the outsiders collected. The ones who didn't believe they were dead. The ones who'd been murdered and couldn't rest. The haunters and sociopaths who'd rather fade away—recalcitrants.

She figured there were teachers just like her all over the world, who'd been chosen by God or maybe the Pope to lead the way. It wasn't an easy job, but it was a rewarding one. She'd been content at it until recently, when the eviction notice came.

At dinner that night, Corrine smacked her lips while watching the Yankee game on Channel Nine. There was this perfect viewing-tunnel if you sat on the couch, where the books and newspapers and crusty take-out boxes framed the screen.

Still furious over the whole "Afterlife" lesson, the children played tricks. They popped into view like jack-

in-the-boxes, then tore out their eyes to frighten her.

“It’s fixed!” Corrine shouted at the screen. “These games, they’re all fixed.” Little drops of Corrine’s spittle sprayed the side of Mary’s cheek. “How much they pay you, Jeter? How much they pay you to throw the damn game?”

An eyeball rolled between Corinne’s feet. She squashed it under her pink slippers without noticing. For that second before his eyes grew back, poor Oscar Knisely’s face was just empty sockets.

“Fuckers took the balls out of baseball!” Corinne muttered.

“We have to pack up soon, Mom. The court said Friday. It’s Tuesday already,” Mary said, because it loomed like that giant iceberg ahead of the *Titanic*. Every second since the court ruling, every moment that kept her from sleep, she wondered: Where would they go? Who would take care of the children?

“You can pack up. I’m staying,” Corinne answered. The vein running vertically down her forehead plumped like a worm. “Why the hell didn’t you pay the taxes?”

Mary looked down at her hands. Homeschooled since she was five, acts hewing to the social fabric were not her strong suit. She knew the Greek Myths and geometry. She didn’t know table manners or how to shake hands. The

court-appointed lawyer had explained this to the Queens District judge, who had sneered at her the same way Corrine was doing right now, like she'd screwed-up on purpose. Like she wanted to live in city housing, abandon her ghost children, and hang out in a two-bedroom ghetto with her abusive, hoarder mother for the rest of her life.

Corinne flicked her imaginary remote control.

“They’ll mess with all my stuff, Mary. And then I’ll have to kill them.”

“You’re getting yourself excited,” Mary said.

“Remember your heart.”

“Ahhh,” Corrine moaned in disgust. “I don’t have a heart, you silly idiot. And don’t think I didn’t notice the mouse trap your friends put in my bed.”

After carrying her mother to bed that night, Mary inspected the mess in the dining room. She sorted through the mail from January 2011. Most were letters from lawyers. A few were marked “Final Notice.” This was before the eviction. Before things got dire. “Please call me,” one of the bankers had written. “We can work something out.”

Mary hobbled through the cluttered tunnels in the front hall until she found the phone. She dialed zero, because it was always easier to have the operator connect

her than figure out when to use an area code. The operator didn't answer. Instead, she got an automated message telling her to pay her bill. This had been the social worker's job until the social worker got fired for incompetence. So now they were between social workers.

Mary leafed through the rest of the 2011 mail, which took up the entire breakfront, and was sorted by date and rubber band color. They were all marked "Final Notice."

The words kind of spun: *Finally Noticed. Fucking Notice. Why didn't you notice?*

The guilt punched a hole deep inside her, and she was sinking, sinking.

Up above, something scrambled. It sounded like mice. Mary headed up the stairs. She shoved aside the stacks of neatly folded moth-eaten sweaters that no one had worn in twenty years. Past Styrofoam containers, and Tupperware filled with colored sand. Past the embalmed cat and the conch shells. To the attic.

The children had returned the desks to their places again and swept the slate blackboard crumbs from the floor. Mary smiled in acknowledgment, but elected not to praise them, since they'd made the mess in the first place.

"Children? Did you put a mouse trap in my mom's bed?" she asked.

Harry Cullen snorted. He came from a farm out east,

back when everybody on Long Island raised chickens.

“It’s not nice. I know she’s mean, but she can’t help it,” Mary said.

“Of course she can help it. That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” Harry answered. He had a slight British lilt—his family hailed from Quebec by way of London.

“She sucks,” Agnes Schermerhorn from Park Avenue answered. The girl was still wearing her bloody debutante gown.

“No more mouse traps,” Mary said.

“I’m not making any promises,” Harry answered.

Mary looked down to hide her smile. Then she noticed something. A quick head count gave her six instead of seven. Her heart sank. Deep, like it had just hit an iceberg. Like her whole body was sinking to the bottom of the ocean floor. “Where’s Oscar?”

Everybody looked down. Mary’s eyes watered. She walked the perimeter of the attic, and, under the shattered blackboard, found his stain. Oscar Knisely had become a shadow. His dark ink bled on her hands. She knelt down and tried to lift him, but he slipped through her fingers.

Tears rolled down both cheeks. “This is what happens when you wait too long. Do you understand?”

The six remaining stood in a line, their faces set like

cold metal.

We are not dead, they mouthed.

Out of at least one thousand kids, she'd prided herself on only losing three. Now four. Oscar. They stopped *being*. Like they'd never been born. It was the worst thing she could imagine.

“You are dead. Dead. Dead!” Mary cried.

Anais Harlow shook her head slowly. She'd be next. Her fingers and nose had already turned shadow. She'd died at fourteen in the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911. The managers had locked all the exits to the factory, even the windows. In the afterlife, she was terrified of open doors. That's the perversity of abuse for you.

Trying hard not to cry, Mary crouched down. “Anais. Please. I've been doing this for more than twenty years. This portal suddenly appeared, you understand? And I knew. I just *knew*. God loves you anyway—you don't need grace. You're punishing yourself for no good reason,” Mary said. She'd meant to be strong—an inspiration. But little Oscar's stain was on her fingers, and suddenly she was bawling.

She didn't stop crying. Not when she left the attic. Not after she brushed her teeth and climbed into bed. Not when she looked out over bedroom—the same bedroom she'd had her whole life, decorated with Dollar Store

Disney Princesses and white eyelet sheets. It was the only place she'd ever masturbated, her eyes fixed on Prince Charming. And in three days she'd have to leave here. Three days, and she was on the street. In three days, her children would be lost.

As if they *knew* this was her breaking point, they scratched along her bedroom door until it opened, all doleful gazes of apology. Anais stroked her forehead—a cold, gossamer touch.

“Stay with us,” she said. “We’ll make our own family.”

Wednesday morning, Mary found some quarters and hiked to the payphone at 31st Avenue before anybody woke up. After about twenty failed attempts and two crying jags, she got through to the number on the eviction notice. A guy with a sandy voice answered. She told him her case number, and that she'd procrastinated a tiny bit, but was finally ready to talk.

“Sweetheart,” he answered. “This went through trial. There's nothing I can do. It looks like . . . oh wow. Uncle Sam's repossessing.”

Would he still call her *sweetheart* if he knew she was forty-five years old and two hundred pounds, Mary wondered. “So, what do I do?” she asked.

Probably, she should have asked sooner.

“Call the news—Channel Twelve New York. Banks hate bad publicity. You pleaded mental incompetence, but they didn’t bite, right?”

Mary was drowning. Her body was the *Titanic*, only less fancy. “Uh . . .”

“Do you have a place to live?”

Mary stared at the phone, like maybe it wasn’t a real phone. It was a prank phone. One of the dead kids, playing a string tin can joke.

“Has a marshal visited yet?” the man asked.

“Normally, people are informed by now. They’ve made plans.”

Mary hung up. All along the avenue, shopkeepers lifted metal security gates. The Hogan family Dollar Store was now a Victoria’s Secret. Next to it was a Gap. Next to that, a Taco Bell.

She stared at the dirty payphone and tried to think of someone to call. For almost half a century, she’d lived like this. Trapped in a house made of junk. Her father across the street, not giving a damn. A portal to the afterlife in the attic, a psychotic mother in the den, an eviction notice taped to the front door, the ghosts of dead children searching for peace. And she’d never once, in all these years, seen the ocean.

In the attic that night, Mary counted seven children again. The new addition wore suspenders and brown leather shoes. He'd been dead for a long time, and just by looking at him Mary knew he was angry. The air around him was cold. He wore red blotches shaped like adult hands on his throat.

The children had made a mess of the place in her absence. Chewed the walls like rats. Ripped apart the floorboards. Broken the desks. Mary picked her way through, then wrote along the remaining, unbroken parts of the chalkboard: "Safe Passage."

"I know this is hard for you. It wasn't your time. But nobody gets to choose the way they're born, and they don't get to choose the way they die, either. So just trust me! Look at Oscar. Oh, that's right. You can't."

Someone—Jane?—threw a wad of paper. It ricocheted off the board and landed at her feet. She bent down and uncrinkled it. *Bitch*, it read in childish cursive.

The new boy tugged her shirtsleeve. His strangle marks were so red they looked bloody. "I can't breathe," he said.

"I know," she told him

"My mother suffocated me."

An eraser went sailing past Mary's head. Bits of red chalk puffed the air. Mary raised her voice. "Children! No

more pranks! My mother is an old woman. That mouse trap could have killed her.”

—“But it’s not her fault,” the boy said.

—“My jailers killed me,” Anais chimed in. Her voice sounded distant, like from under water. She was fading fast.

—“A horse kicked me,” Henry said.

—“My brother broke my wrists with a cleaver,” Anges Schermerhorn confessed. “It ruined my dress.”

—“She killed me because she loves me.”

—“I hate the door, but I love the prison.”

—“I branded its hind and set it on fire.”

Suddenly, all the children were chattering about their restive deaths. They did not hear each other. They did not see each other. Lost in their personal reveries, their words became soft, angry prayers.

It occurred to Mary that when the marshals threw her out of the house on Friday, her ghosts would turn savage. Go poltergeist.

“Goddamnit! You’re dead! You’re dead! You’re dead!” Mary cried.

“You’re the one who’s never lived,” Anais said.

Mary leaned her face against the broken blackboard. It opened up again, a tennis ball-sized void. She stuck her arm through until it went numb.

It felt like being unborn.

The sun had not yet set when Mary finished cleaning the attic, so she put a windbreaker over her mother's shoulders and wheeled her into the front yard. The season was Indian summer, all red and yellow leaves.

Over the last forty years, the neighborhood had changed. The Turks and Greeks had joined forces against the Pakistanis. Sports cars blasted Moroccan techno music. Young, white hipsters walked arm-in-arm, wearing thrift shop clothes as a joke. All the Greek statues were gone, replaced by aluminum siding and Astro turf.

“It's all weirdos out here now,” Corinne said.

A car alarm sounded. Mary couldn't tell which one—all the cars looked the same. “I want to see the ocean, Mom. Could you show me how to get there?” she asked.

Corrine shook her head. “Why would you want that, stoopid? It's too salty. Sand gets in your girl parts, takes your special gift.”

Mary dug her hand into a bunch of weedy grass. The dirt beneath was hard. “You never taught me anything, Mom. I don't even know how to talk to people, and then you tell me I'm no good. It's not fair.”

The car alarm kept beeping. Somebody in the ground

floor apartment across the street shouted, “Shut up!”

Corinne looked ahead, all glassy-eyed like she hadn’t heard. Like Mary hadn’t asked, every year, for her birthday, to learn to use the subway. To see Coney Island. Or a baseball game, at a real, live stadium.

“What will we do when we lose the house, Mom?”

The alarm kept going. Some fifteen year-old boys rode by on skateboards. Their bodies were preternaturally agile. Corinne craned her neck as they passed, *tsk-tsking*.

Just like at the trial, Mary started crying. “Why won’t you teach me anything?”

“I don’t remember anything,” Corinne spit. “You want me to show you how to do things, and I don’t remember.”

Mary bunched her grass-filled hands into fists. That fucking car alarm was driving her crazy. “I see ghosts, did you know that? They live in our attic. Everybody who got stuck before they changed Limbo. I help them. I’m good at it. They love me.”

Corrine coughed. Alarmingly, and to Mary’s terror, the spittle was red. “They’re idiots,” she muttered.

“Who?”

Corinne jutted her chin in the direction ahead, where Mary’s father and the red-head floozy who was now sixty-eight years old came out and turned off their car

alarm. Mary imagined the two of them spooning at night. Caressing. But they didn't seem like people in love. From the garbage they set out, she knew they drank. Everything here was so ugly.

Her dad and the floozy spotted Mary and Corrine. They froze like shocked deer, then jogged their out-of-shape bodies back indoors. They never said hello or called or visited anymore. But at least, just then, when they'd gazed upon Mary and her mother, she'd felt good. Safe. It meant that she was real. "I'm not talking about Dad. I'm talking about the ghosts. Do you ever see them?" Mary asked.

Corinne nodded, and maybe she understood, maybe she didn't. "They always want something. What the fuck do I care that they're lost? Jesus, if I'd known this house was haunted I'd have bought on the N train instead."

Corinne coughed into her hand. More blood. "You just—don't worry, Mary. Ignore them and they always go away. Or you can trap them. I figured it out a long time ago. Mess the rooms up so they never see the same landmarks. Mess the garbage into all kindsa piles. They get confused. Then you put them in jars and don't punch air holes. They lose it like you wouldn't believe. They don't know they don't need air. They don't know they can get out, dumb fuckers."

Appalled, Mary got up and headed back inside.
“Help me up!” Corrine howled from her chair.
For the first time in her life, Mary kept walking.

Thursday morning, the children switched the Scope for Drāno. Corrine would have drunk it if Mary hadn't been passing by the bathroom.

In the attic, Mary found three more children. High school kids. They'd died in a boating accident. Drunk, they'd crashed their rum-runner into a sand bar. Everybody got thrown. The girl wore a yellow, motor-mangled polka dot bikini and that song played in Mary's head.

“Today's lesson will cover fractions,” she started.
“You, for example, are not whole. You never will be. So just give up.”

Anais coughed from the front row. The center of her chest was gone. It was dark in there, like it had been folded in half, then re-opened.

“Anais, please. Go through.”

Anais stood from her chair.

“Don't! Don't! Don't!” the girl in the polka dot bikini chanted. Mary hated her right then, because she was young and beautiful, and because she'd seen the ocean. She hated all of them, because they'd had the good

fortune of not being Corrine Hogan's daughter.

"Don't!" all of the children started chanting.

Mary bent down to Anais's level. The girl still smelled like electrical fire. Mary imagined luring her down to the den, then playing hide and seek among the ruins of the entire Hogan civilization. Capturing her in a jar without holes.

"I want my mother," Anais said.

"She's in the portal," Mary answered. "Go find her."

"No," Anais said. "You're my mother. My good mother that loves me. I'll never leave here. Not when I could be with you."

Mary exhaled. Everything tight inside her broke apart, like a giant iceberg turned to sharp shards. "I'm not a mother. I'm nothing."

"You're mine," Anais answered, "I love you."

Mary's heart filled; it really did. This was the same attic where Corinne had homeschooled her until she turned twenty-two. The same attic where she'd had to balance bibles on both outstretched arms, and where she'd had to crawl on her knees as penance for days at a time.

She kissed the top of the child's head. Then she carried her to the blackboard, where the portal opened, edges spinning. "Don't!" the others shouted.

A bundle of trust, Anais watched with wide, frightened eyes. Mary eased her against the opening. The child's heart fluttered under her fingers. She'd faded so much that her mouth was gone.

Up. A little higher. Mary eased her through. Her fingers went along for the ride. They turned to ice, like you could crack them to pieces. Anais grunted in terror. Her heart stopped. Then she was gone.

A better place, Mary hoped.

Back in the classroom, the children had disappeared. Everything was still. The hole closed like it had never been. Dust speckled against sunlight. For just a moment, she wondered if she'd gone mad. If there were no children, and had never been. But then a box of off-brand wax crayons came hurling from the polka dot cutie's desk. Mary ducked as it smashed into the broken chalkboard.

From nothing, the strangled little boy appeared. Hands shone red against his neck. "My mother's very sick," he said.

"You have to go through," Mary told him. "All of you."

"Will you help me find my mother?" he asked.

"She doesn't love you. I lied before when I said she was on the other side. She was a bad woman. She can't

possibly be in a good place. Let me be your mother. Let me help you.”

“But I have to find her. I have to make her love me,” the boy said.

Mary shook her head, and, as if it meant everything, told him, “But don’t you see? I loved my mother, too.”

Mary found her mother in the den watching *Red Skelton*. “What happened to your arms?”

Corrine lay recumbent across the wicker couch, her feet propped by a broken toaster oven. Someone had scratched the word *bitch* all along her bare arms in dark red marker. Mary counted: ten times in all.

“What the hell do you think?” Corrine asked. “Get me some fucking soup.”

In the kitchen, Mary heated some Campbell’s chicken noodle, then threw all the February mail stamped “Final Notice” out the back door where it drifted in the autumn breeze. It felt so good to let go that she threw out March, April, and May, too.

In the evening there was another Yankee game, followed by a dead mouse that Mary found between her mother’s sheets. Followed by seven jars crammed behind a bunch of old stuffed animals under Corinne’s bed. Mary pulled them out and opened them. The smell was rank,

like festered souls turned to soup. Each had a name and some numbers written in masking tape along the side:

Jillian Mapother - six years old, thirty years dead.

Captured July 16, 1992

Charmaine Dulles - nineteen years old, 107 years dead. Captured December 25, 2001

Atticus Spenser - four years old, twenty-one years dead. Captured June 4, 2002

David Sperlog - two years old, 218 years dead. Captured June 3, 2005

Hugo Fielding - seven years old, forty-three years dead. Captured June 4, 2008

Lisa Sconzo - twelve years old, ninety-eight years dead. Captured June 4, 2011

Enique Saloman - twelve years old, ninety-eight years dead. Captured June 4, 2012

Oscar Knisely - eight years old, 113 years dead. Captured September 14, 2013

After that, Mary filled a bag with freshly washed jeans and faded t-shirts. She carried it down the stairs on tip-toe, unlocked the back door and sneaked out. The crisp, fall air felt like freedom. She could see the children's faces pressed against the hunched attic windows. They watched in shock.

Moths circled the streetlamps. A gypsy cab beeped

and pulled over. She started to get in, then remembered she had no money.

“Who did that to you?” the Iranian man behind the wheel asked.

She backed away slow, then ran like a little piggy all the way home. In the bathroom mirror next to the Drāno, she saw that someone had doodled a third eye over her forehead.

Corrine needed help getting to bed that Thursday night, so Mary carried her. She wasn't light like most old ladies. Her bones could have been lead. Mary washed her arms, then her legs. The bucket went red with bleeding *bitch*.

The girl in the polka dot bikini hid in Corrine's closet. She snapped her suit against her toned, tight thigh—loud as bubble gum. “We ought to put her through the hole,” Polka Dot said as Mary hung her mother's laundry. “Like a canary in a coal mine!”

Mary looked down at Corrine, who wasn't sleeping.

“You always thought you were special. And look where it got us,” the old lady said.

“All children are special,” Mary answered.

Corinne sneered. “Not you. You're talking to these little monsters and God doesn't even care about them. I mean, where are all my dead soul jars? The truth is,

you're crazy *and* stupid: *croopid*.”

Mary spilled the bucket of pink water across Corinne's bed. “Oops. The children did it,” she said as she walked out.

Friday morning, the doorbell rang. Mary went first to Corinne. The water by her bed had turned to ice. The strangled kid, Mary guessed. Sometimes their anger froze things. Surrounding Corinne was a mountain of crap. Clothes, towels, plastic shoes, kitty litter, cigarette lighters. A grandfather clock that had stopped chiming.

“Help me up!” Corinne ordered from beneath the frozen pile. “I'm stuck!”

Down below, the marshals banged. Mary looked at her mother for a long second. “I'll forgive everything if you take me to the ocean.”

Corinne shook her head. “I told you, I don't remember.”

Mary headed for the attic. At first, the children's giggling was muffled. But after a while, it got loud.

“You think I don't know what you do up there, Mary? You think I'm croopid?” Corinne shouted from down below. She'd followed, it seemed. Her voice came from the bottom of the steep stairway.

Mary sat down beneath the blackboard. The children

had replaced her chalk with razor blades.

“Does my mom ever come up here while I’m sleeping?” she asked. “Does she hurt you?”

“Good for nothing,” the girl in the polka dot bikini said. The scary part: she used Corinne’s voice.

“Not much of a looker,” another chimed in Corrine’s voice, too.

“I’ve seen monkeys with less hair on their chins,” spat the strangled boy.

—“Remember when she pissed her pants at Beth McDonald’s sleepover?”

—“Remember when Donnie Nowicki kissed her and she started to cry?”

—“Remember how she wanted to be the Virgin Mary?”

—“Remember how she almost drowned in that pool?”

—“Remember that picture she hung over her bed of the ocean, and how we laughed and laughed?”

All were talking. All using Corrine’s voice. Corrine’s memories. They didn’t see each other. Didn’t see anything, except their own pain and fury. Already, they’d gone poltergeist.

“Were there more of you, only you didn’t find your way to me? My mother caught you?” Mary asked.

They'd stopped seeing at all and felt their way, walking through walls and each other with blind hands. Their words were a frenzy, spoken to no one.

—*Cunt!*

—*Bitch!*

—*Useless!*

—*Stupid!*

—*Croopid!*

—*Mistake!*

—*Wish she'd never been born.*

The broken blackboard yawned. It sounded like hard wind. Like a fan. Like . . . the ocean.

Two floors below, a door burst open. Heavy footsteps clomped, then stood still as if amazed by what they'd discovered. "Hoarders!" A cop mumbled from far away.

Corinne climbed the attic steps. Mary could hear her pink plastic slippers. She was coming. The cops were coming. They all were coming.

Mary clutched her opposite elbows and hugged her ample breasts as she backed up against the broken blackboard. The hole yawned giant.

The children, all nine of them, chanted and jeered in a lunatic frenzy.

"Mary? Where are you? Help me, Mary!" Corinne shouted as she climbed. "You got a way out, don't you?"

Mary picked up the razor. Just one. A little one. She thrashed. Corrine leaped back in surprise and fell. Down, down, down. The children woke from their madness and cheered. The body down there moved slowly as it groaned. Its eyes stayed open in shock.

The children jumped. They hooted. They hollered. They screamed.

“Follow me,” Mary said. “Now!”

She reached inside the ice-cold blackboard. First her hands, then her feet, the tip of her nose, the edges of her full breasts. Its noise, she now recognized, was what she'd once experienced at a neighbor's pool back when she'd first learned to walk. She'd gotten away from her own house—known even then that the place was a trap. So she'd fallen inside the thing, then sunk to its plastic bottom. Like the portal, it'd had an echoing of sound; a strange density of something that isn't air. She'd been in perfect control of herself, free and happy, until Corrine pulled her out. Her whole life, she'd been trying to get back there.

Edges whipped. Marshalls' footsteps clomped from far, far away. The portal drew her inside. One step, the next. To the ocean. To the deep. To a place where her mother would never find her.

She beckoned with her remaining hand, and the

children, disarmed by her sacrifice, followed.

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Sarah Langan is the author of the novels *The Keeper* and *The Missing*, and her most recent novel, *Audrey's Door*, won the 2009 Bram Stoker Award for best novel. Her short fiction has appeared in the magazines *Cemetery Dance*, *Phantom*, and *Chiaroscuro*, and in the anthologies *Brave New Worlds*, *Darkness on the Edge*, and *Unspeakable Horror*. She is currently working on a post-apocalyptic young adult series called *Kids* and two adult novels: *Empty Houses*, which was inspired by *The Twilight Zone*, and *My Father's Ghost*, which was inspired by *Hamlet*. Her work has been translated into ten languages and optioned by the Weinstein Company for film. It has also garnered three Bram Stoker Awards, an American Library Association Award, two Dark Scribe Awards, a *New York Times Book Review* editor's pick, and a *Publishers Weekly* favorite book of the year selection.

The H Word: “The Other Scarlet Letter”

R.J. Sevin

Welcome to the first installment of “The H Word,” our monthly dissection of the horror genre. In the future, I, along with various guest columnists, will take the beast apart, piece by twitching piece, in an effort to see what makes it tick . . . to see what works and what doesn’t. We’ll cover popular tropes and popular sub-genres, and we’ll even shine a light on specific, important works.

For now, appropriately enough, we’re going to talk about the H word itself.

In her 1997 *OMNI Online* piece, “The Meaning of the ‘H’ Word,” acclaimed editor Paula Guran wrote:

The word horror (in a literary sense) has had so many meanings and connotations over the years it’s easy to get confused. Recently, the “H” word has been downright abused, twisted into a salable product, then abandoned as not commercial. It’s become as much an epitaph as a description.

The entire piece is available online, and it remains worth your time, fifteen years later. In it, Guran endeavors to determine the meaning of the H word, and focuses on horror as emotion—an emotion found not only in King

and Lovecraft, but in Kafka and Melville and, well, everywhere. A noble conceit, and one to which we will return in subsequent chapters of “The H Word.”

For now, however, our concern is the H word as it pertains to fiction—not as an abstract concept, but as a brand. As a signifier.

As a stigma.

When I tell folks that I write/publish/read horror, the typical response I receive is a pulling away of sorts, a distancing, and a variation on the following, uttered with either unease or condescension—or both—and a dismissive shake of the head: “Oh . . . I don’t read horror. I don’t like all that gory slasher stuff.”

A few years ago, as a Barnes and Noble bookseller, I made the mistake of calling F. Paul Wilson a horror writer. The customer to whom I was speaking was a huge fan of Mr. Wilson’s work, and was very pleased to learn of the lovely deluxe *Adversary Cycle* set from Borderlands Press, but as soon as I said the words “horror” and “writer” back to back, he told me I was wrong and made a break.

Even better: not long thereafter, I actually had to make the case to another customer that *Stephen King* was a horror writer. She scrunched her face and looked at me like I was an idiot and said, “Is he?” She didn’t think he

was.

Why? Because she *read* Stephen King and she *liked* Stephen King, and she didn't read *or* like horror.

No matter your association with the genre, you've probably experienced this as well. It's annoying, but it's not without cause. There's a culprit, you know:

Horror movies.

We love them, but they've tainted this genre. They've made the H word a dirty word, and let's face it: we don't have the numbers to effectively make our case.

A digression:

Cinema dominates the public's perception of horror, and, sadly, this perception was shaped in the eighties. As Stephen King burned up the New York Times Bestseller list and earned the dubious "King of Horror" label (the nice lady at B&N must've missed that), more folks came to know his name through a series of mostly awful movies than through his writing, and franchises like *Friday The 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* pulled more people into movie theaters and video stores than any King novel attracted readers to Waldenbooks.

Thus, Annie Wilkes is burly Kathy Bates breaking Paul Sheldon's leg, not King's obese mountain of a woman sawing it off and chopping off his fingers. And Jack Torrance is maniacal Jack Nicholson splintering a

door with an axe, not the Constant Writer's tragic schoolteacher chasing poor Danny with a roque mallet.

A further digression, with zombies:

And yesterday is today: fans of *The Walking Dead* comic book series grumble with every deviation the AMC series makes from the source material (and lemme tell ya, they screwed the pooch to death on the whole final business between Shane and Rick and Carl, the cowards—grumble, grumble). But Robert Kirkman's take on Romero moves approximately thirty thousand copies a month. To be sure, it's Image's highest selling title, and the first trade paperback collection (compiling the first six issues of the series, which recently got its one hundred issue chip) has moved a few hundred thousand units.

Impressive, yeah—but the AMC series pulls in close to ten million viewers. That's ten *million*. Versus thirty thousand. Versus two hundred thousand or three hundred thousand or whatever. The point: the books don't matter. And people don't read.

But the folks who *do* read don't read horror, even if they do read horror, because horror is that *Hostel* and *Saw* business that comes on cable late at night, and that shit is disgusting. And when a good horror movie comes along—one that isn't about big-breasted girls running from masked killers, with which most people seem to think all

horror movies are concerned—rest assured that the semantic hoops will once again roll out and you'll get to see fans of and everyone involved with movies like *The Exorcist* and *The Silence of the Lambs* tell you that their movies aren't horror. Why? Because these are good movies. These are *great* movies. And horror—it is implied/assumed/inferred—is trash.

Thus the stigma. Thus the H word.

Back to point:

I'm all for shit-canning our tribal attachment to the H word—to the very notion of *genre*, which is nothing more than a series of limits and strictures that result in homogenization—but dammit, we need labels, don't we? And I've spoken to enough ardent horror fans to know that they'll give up the H word when it's pried from their cold, dead (or undead) fingers.

To be fair, the blame for horror fiction's bad reputation should not be heaped entirely on the public's perception of horror films. Any thinking reader purchasing books in the late eighties remembers their grocery-store paperback spin-rack groaning under the weight of black-spined, red-lettered paperbacks sporting trashy, skull-coated covers. Obvious post-King hackwork with titles like *The Something* or *The Other*.

The literary horror genre as it existed in the late

eighties is dead (and good riddance), and you're not going to find any new books with "horror" on their spines, because there was Tor's Horror imprint and Pinnacle's Horror imprint and Leisure's Horror imprint (there's a horror story right there), and many other publishers catering to the horror niche. But no more. The much-debated (among horror circles, anyway) Horror Section has gone the way of Borders, and is now being partitioned into office space.

And so, Horror is dead. This does not stop New York from publishing stunningly horrific novels like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Donald Pollock's *The Devil All the Time*, to name but two. Folks will tell you that those books aren't horror, but don't listen to them: you know better. If you're a horror writer, take Jonathan Maberry's advice and change "horror" to "supernatural thriller" (or just "thriller," if your book has no things that go bump) in your cover letter. Ditto if you're a reader and you're trying to get your aunt or your significant other to read Jack Ketchum's *The Girl Next Door* or Gary A. Braunbeck's *In Silent Graves*. They won't know what hit 'em.

Be subversive: drop the H bomb.

We at *Nightmare Magazine* like discussions. Please use

the comments feature to give us your thoughts on whether the H brand is an albatross or worth holding on to, and feel free to drop me a line at rj@nightmare-magazine. Print may be dead, but that doesn't mean we can't be old school and have a good, old-fashioned letters page.

R.J. Sevin is the co-editor of the Stoker-nominated anthology *Corpse Blossoms* and he currently edits *Print Is Dead*, the zombie-themed imprint from Creeping Hemlock Press. His nonfiction has appeared in *Cemetery Dance*, *Dark Discoveries*, *Fear Zone*, *Famous Monsters of Filmland Online*, and *Tor.com*.

Artist Gallery: Jeff Simpson





















Artist Spotlight: Jeff Simpson

Julia Sevin

Jeff Simpson is a digital painter and concept artist based in Montreal. He studied animation at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and currently works for Ubisoft on titles such as the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. Jeff can be found online at surrealsushi.com and jeffsimpsonkh.deviantart.com.

While you generally don't categorize it as horror, it's clear that you're drawn to an eerier aesthetic in your personal work than you typically get to express in your illustrations for Ubisoft. Could you tell us about this attraction, and where it came from?

It's difficult to explain why I'm attracted to things that are aesthetically on the darker or more somber and atmospheric side. I think it's because I like to see things that have a little bit of mystery to them. I think sometimes it is difficult to separate mystery from fear or horror.

When I'm painting it's rarely my intention to make things feel "scary," rather I like to try to show things in a more honest way. Things are always so much more interesting

when we are shown the hidden layers and other sides of subjects or stories or people, even if it can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable at times.

Can you tell us a little bit about your education as an artist? Your degree is in animation; did you have a focus on concept art specifically, or animation in general?

School was fun, I met a lot of cool people but discovered that I kinda suck at animating, traditionally anyways. I learned most of the skills and techniques for digital painting on my own, at home, after class. Since I was fortunate to be a student in the era of the internet, I had more than enough feedback and resources available to me to learn what concept art was, who the pros were, and how to hopefully get as good as them.

Which artists inspire you and contributed to the development of your style?

During high school I was one of those kids who was inspired by anything dark and creepy, the weirder the better, in a failed attempt to make chicks think I was cool!

But once I got into college, I started to get more interested in artists with a more elegant, feminine (if that's the word) styles such as James Jean, Yoshitaka Amano, Sam Weber, etc. At the time I only just learned that "illustration" was an actual profession. Up until then I had assumed there were only two choices: a high-brow ultra minimalist bizarre modern artist or a CG production/concept artist. Today, I get inspired much less by artists but more by things found elsewhere in nature, emotions, attitudes. I find myself wanting less and less to try to fit into a certain group of artists or genres and have begun having a pretty delusional obsession with trying to create something truly fresh and unique with my work. I'm not sure how well that has worked out so far though!

Your digital brush style is reminiscent of many real oil paintings of the 19th and 20th centuries (plus some impossible-for-oils luminescent flourishes). Is this something you have a background in and consciously endeavor for, or would you describe it as an organic (no pun intended) product of digital painting?

I've had extremely limited experience in oils myself. I spent a lot of time with pencils and pens but I should like to try oils someday, when I have balls to actually set up a

studio space for myself. I think it's safe to say that all digital painters are secretly trying to be able to paint as well as the old masters with their oils. It is very interesting to me to see the evolution of the digital painters today; it feels like ninety-five percent are just happy to create work that is serviceable, clean, attractive. I think emotion and subtlety is something we all need to work on—the lack of limitations and the demand for commercial work has in a strange way, I feel, limited the potential of the medium. I think we have become afraid of mistakes, afraid of risks and the confidence to stick with your gut, since sometimes it is a detriment to have too much freedom and choices when creating an image.

Portraiture with a fantasy twist is a theme of yours. What is the significance of this to you? Does the imagery come from anyplace specific?

I often find myself stuck between two ways of thinking. Part of me wants to make cool fantasy stuff, that I can put into fantasy books and get work doing cool-ass creatures and knights and witches and all that jazz. The other part of me is a snobby high level prude who constantly shoots down these ideas and dismisses them as trite wastes of time and that I should spend all my effort trying to think

of SOUL SHATTERING new ways to express myself. I suppose it's a combination of these thoughts that give my work a certain appeal to both fields, but it can be a little difficult to finish a piece when I can't decide what kind of image it should be.

Do you draw ideas from fiction? If so, which authors do you find inspiring?

Sadly I do not read as much as I should! Unsurprisingly I like works that ride the line between fantasy and fiction. Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* was one of my favorites. I like fantasy/specific/whatever when it is treated like fiction, when the world has credibility.

What is your process for a piece and how long does it typically take from start to finish?

My process for personal works is chaotic and can take from weeks to a single day. I will more often than not start on an image one way and have it finished completely differently, sometimes making it embarrassing for me to do tutorials and live demos! I get bored easily, and if a piece is starting to look flat I have no quarrels about

completely changing it and painting over huge sections I've already done (and also cutting it up and using it somewhere else if I must)!

There is a recurrent figure in your portraiture work who I assume to be real; is she someone close to you? How does she feel about her face being used as a part of bizarre imagery?

I get asked this alot, but the answer is not as interesting as people hope! She is a model and a friend of mine hired for poses. She says she's okay with seeing her face pop up online everywhere but her friends and family think it's a little weird (haha). But she is a lot of fun to work with, and of course I think she is stunning!

What are you working on right now?

At work I'm working on the *Assassin's Creed* franchise as I have been for the past year and a half or so. At home I am slowly doing personal pieces, but not as regularly as I used to. Occasionally I will take on some freelance, however right now I am enjoying a bit of a break!

What's your dream illustration job?

I count myself as being very fortunate to have done some dream jobs for Ubisoft and Universal. Right now my real dream job would be to do the work I do for myself as a job, perhaps a personal art book or gallery show. Then again working on something like *The Hobbit* or *Star Wars* would be pretty damn cool too!

Originally hailing from Northern California, **Julia Sevin** is a transplant flourishing in the fecund delta silts of New Orleans. Together with husband RJ Sevin, she owns and edits Creeping Hemlock Press, specializing in limited special editions of genre literature and, most recently, zombie novels. She is an autodidact pixelpusher who spends her days as the art director for a print brokerage designing branding and print pieces for assorted political bigwigs, which makes her feel like an accomplice in the calculated plunder of America. Under the cover of darkness (like Batman in more ways than she can enumerate), she redeems herself through pro bono design, sordid illustration, and baking the world's best pies. She is available for contract design/illustration including book layouts and websites. See more of her work at juliasevin.com or follow her at facebook.com/juliasevindesign.

Interview: Peter Straub (Part 1)

John Langan

Peter Straub (b.1943) has been for more than three decades one of the leading lights of horror and suspense fiction. His early successes in the field, *Julia* (1975) and *If You Could See Me Now* (1976), were followed by a set of three novels, *Ghost Story* (1979), *Shadowland* (1980), and *Floating Dragon* (1983), that dramatically expanded the possibilities of the horror novel. In 1984, Straub co-wrote *The Talisman* with Stephen King; the two would return to the material of the novel in 2001, with *Black House*. Straub's next solo project after *The Talisman*, the *Blue Rose* trilogy (*Koko* (1988), *Mystery* (1989), *The Throat* (1993)), engaged the suspense and mystery genres to construct what might be the central work of his career, one rooted in an obsession with the multifarious ways the violence of the past continues to twist the present. Since then, Straub has written two long novels that continued his exploration of the suspense and horror fields (*The Hellfire Club* (1996) and *Mr. X.* (1999), respectively), two short novels that use the tropes of conventional horror narratives to explore the relationship between loss and fantasy (*lost boy/lost girl* (2003) and *In the Night Room*

(2004)), and a long novel that appeared in a limited edition as he wrote it (*The Skylark* (2010)) and in a mass market edition as he edited it (*A Dark Matter* (2010)). He has published several collections of short fiction (*Houses Without Doors* (1989), *Magic Terror* (2000), *Five Stories* (2008)), a collection of essays (*Sides* (2007)), and has co-written a graphic novel (*The Green Woman* (2010)). He lives in New York City with his wife, Susan.

Everyone asks about *Ghost Story* or about *Koko*—and we can certainly discuss those—but I thought it would be interesting to talk about some of the more recent novels, like *Mr. X* and *The Hellfire Club*.

Nobody ever talks about those books.

Great! So let's start with one of those general questions. How about this: serial killers. In your work, starting I suppose in *Floating Dragon* with an evil that shows up generationally and kills a bunch of people—a kind of a proto-serial killer—and then obviously in the *Blue Rose* books and moving on to something like *A Special Place*, serial killers have been a crucial part of the work you've been doing. What does the figure

of the serial killer represent to you? What are your thoughts on your own continuing fascination with that figure?

That's a really good question. Perhaps at present, I'm not very interested in them because I've learned too much about serial killers and they're a pretty narrow, drab bunch. When I was first thinking about them, though, I invested them with a kind of weird imaginative splendor and part of this was incited by a man whose name was The Shoemaker, whose real name was something like Joseph Kallinger, close to Kalendar because I've used that name. He was a shoemaker who went seriously off the rails and he murdered a couple of women—in their houses, I think—and for one of these adventures he took his son along with him. (His son was twelve or something.) And his son, probably confused and unhappy, assisted his father in the murder of one of these women. And then Kallinger, whatever his name was, became suspicious of his son and thought he couldn't trust him, so he killed him. And the part that got me is the next turn of the screw: one day walking down the street, this man, Joseph Kallinger, saw his son's head floating before him, his severed head, talking to him, rebuking him. "My God that's an interesting frame of mind," I said

to myself. It was like imagination gone completely haywire. Of course, what it is really is paranoid schizophrenia, or something like that. It's mental illness. I thought of serial killers as infinitely involved in the most sacred matter of all, that of life and death. I see the passage into death as an immense transition from the temporal into the eternal. I think there's a tremendous focused power involved in that particular moment. Dead bodies for a while, I think, still have some of that force. So the idea of people who went around habitually murdering other people solely for the experience of murdering them, that is, participating in this great process—in an evil way, of course—from an unappetizing, mentally-ill manner, they couldn't help but be interesting to me. I thought that they probably had fascinating inner lives. If you run your life that way, the most important part of your life must be secret; everything else is a sort of code surrounding the secret. The idea of having a daylight life and a nighttime life, as it were, just fascinated me, and so I set these people in *Koko*, in Manuel . . .

Dengler.

Dengler, yeah. Turns out to be this savage killer, but in a

way he is regarded with absolute love. And the love that goes to him is aroused by what happens to that man in his childhood. He survived a hideous childhood and he was only holding it together in his adult life, and then the incident happened in the cave—something he saw—triggered this deep time bomb and then off he went. Every time I tried to describe a serial killer, I always went back to that same conception that some people are made out of other people who have a great potential for good that was by cruelty and ignorance pounded out of them, so their lives turn into retribution. Unfortunately, the retribution is wreaked upon the innocent. You know that long story, “Bunny Is Good Bread.”

That was sliced out of *The Throat*—and it should have been; I’m glad I did it—because it isn’t much like *The Throat*. It explains the man who’s the secret main character. But again I wanted to enter a kind of cauldron, a place of dark emotions and pitiable fears and inhuman domination. Everyone’s childhood has something of that, maybe only to a little degree—a very small degree—but there are children—I didn’t make them up; they’re there in real life—whose whole childhoods are composed of such cruelties I feel empathy for them. What I feel for the man who grew up from that child—I feel a kind of extremity of pity. I think, “You shouldn’t be that way.

Somebody made you that way. You are a horrible being, but it isn't all your fault.”

Now, some people, eventually, they make the decision that no one's allowed to make: It is all right for me to kill other people. You know, there's the weak link in the chain. And once you make that decision, you forgo other people's empathy, pity, and compassion. But there was still a trace left in me. So it's a funny thing, but for much of my work, when I look at the serial killer, in a way he's the most beloved character in the book. This surely must give my work an odd taste, but it's worth thinking about for a bit. Then as I went along and serial killers became so common that they were commonplace and now a cliché, I learned that they have no inner lives, that the switch goes on, they think, “Oh, I'm going to have to kill somebody, going to have to kill somebody else. Okay, I'll go kill somebody.” Then they kill somebody; then they go back to their job at the factory. Just generally speaking, they are blue collar, uneducated characters without much luck in the world; though at times, of course, they are psychologically more involved than that. What they do is so outré, so extreme, so grotesque, so operatic that even now, having said what I just said, I think that sometimes it's interesting. But I don't think I should keep on using them. I should confess, though, that in the book I'm

working on now, which at the moment is called *The Smell of Fire*, I'm just about to wade into the first Jack the Ripper murder.

Good Lord, speaking of serial killers.

He is the granddaddy. There's going to be a little collision between past and present in which a very, very bad person—he's Tilly Hayward—encounters his own grandfather, as it were. So that, I like that idea. I'm crazy about that idea. And it'll be interesting to in a way enact the Jack the Ripper murders because they did occur in the world and when things occur like that they should be remembered and limned. They shouldn't be shut away in a kind of quasi-forgetfulness. So that's my answer about serial killers.

Okay. Let's shift gears slightly, to what I guess you might call the shared universe. Starting with *Koko* and the *Blue Rose* trilogy you wrote a number of novels in which you had, if not exactly the same setting, iterations of the same setting—as well as recurring characters. Obviously, there's a literary precedent for this in Faulkner's work or Balzac's

work. What advantage do you feel that gives to you as a writer; what fascination does that exert over you as a writer?

You're absolutely right, it's a part of my practice. My attitude toward it awakened at a very specific moment. I was writing *Koko*; I'd been writing it for a long time and I'd gone a long way through. I was at the part where three of the characters go to the real Milwaukee; they stay in the Pforzheimer Hotel, which is in fact the Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee. They're there in the winter; there are big snow drifts at the side of the street. Well I, on the other hand, was at a Caribbean resort with a very nice bungalow and just a short distance from a pool. (It was called La Semana and it was in the French part of St. Martin.) I brought along the bound journal in which I wrote that book—that is, I wrote that book in five big bound journals—and I'd just got to the point where Michael Poole was looking out of the hotel window and I couldn't remember the name of the street that runs alongside the Pfister. My wife was in earshot, so I said, "Suzie, what's the name of that street that runs along the east side of the Pfister hotel?" And she said, "Jefferson." At that moment, I realized, I can call it anything I like. I wasn't going to be like James Joyce and get the

geographical details exactly right. I wanted to be the reverse. I wanted to have total imaginative freedom over the city that these characters had just moved to. I've made up everything else. Poole lives in a suburb of Connecticut that doesn't exist—it's based on Westport, but it isn't really Westport—and I realized I could do the same thing to Milwaukee. I could heighten it. I could darken it. I could stretch it out like taffy or like Play-Doh and mold it in any shape I like, which I then promptly began to do. I'm very fond of that part of the book and I think it's good because the exaggerations worked very well. It was called Milwaukee because at that point I didn't see any reason to change the name. When the book was reviewed in the Milwaukee papers, the Milwaukeeans were very, very unhappy because I made the place sound like a sewer, and I made them sound like block-heads and half-savage; so thereafter, I took the liberty of locating Milwaukee anywhere I liked, calling it anything I liked as long as it was pretty close to Milwaukee, and populating it with whatever universities, apartment buildings, hotels, bars, were useful for me. Right after that, we moved to a Caribbean island called Mill Walk—they didn't get that in Milwaukee even though the streets of this Caribbean island had names just like those of certain Milwaukee streets except with –strasseon the end. It's German the

way Milwaukee is; there's a big Polish population as there is in Milwaukee. Because I put in hummingbirds and bougainvillea, people in Milwaukee didn't make the association. Thereafter, I moved it across the border into Illinois and I sometimes alluded to Milwaukee to the north and Chicago to the south. Then I was really free to do anything I liked. If my memory of certain neighborhoods was inaccurate, it's my memory, and it's pretty detailed, even though I'm probably making half of it up. I was free to wander around the city that became known as Millhaven and do anything I liked. If I'm doing these things, I almost always put in the house where I was a very, very small child which is north 44th Street, near the intersection on 44th and Auer, only a couple of blocks from Sherman Park. *lost boy/lost girl* is placed in that neighborhood and *In The Night Room* goes there. It strikes me as a place of muffled violence, of hidden acts, of dark imaginations. This is a place where I was a small boy; when I try to see through the eyes of the small boy that I used to be, the things that I see are very beautiful. So there's also that. The fact that dead leaves in a gutter filled with running water can be extraordinarily beautiful might not occur to everybody but it certainly did to me because I was very struck by it when I was four years old. Anyhow, so what I do let there be are convenient

landmarks. There's an empty lot I know very well—a vacant lot, I mean—and Sherman Park, which has a lot of god stuff in it, including a zoo—the zoo isn't there anymore, but it was at the end of the forties and through the fifties. There's a movie theatre of dread reputation, now a storefront church. These are the places in which I came alive and what I saw was of immense importance to me. I was trying to understand things; I was trying to work things out. When I was five years old, I thought everything had a meaning. I thought if I could put the meanings together in the right way I would get it. I didn't know then—well, if I were a painter, I might have been able to do it, but because I was an infant writer, I had to wait until I had acquired the capacity to read and then learned to use words in my own way.

It's also of course a great convenience that because I made everything up I know where most things are, they have rich histories now with a lot of dead people in them. A great many serial killers seem to have originated in Millhaven.

**When you drive into the city, is that on the signs:
Serial Killer Capital of America?**

Illinois, it's in Illinois.

This next may bring the previous two questions together. A number of books—I'm thinking here of *Shadowland*, *Mystery*, in a way *The Hellfire Club*, even *A Dark Matter*—they're novels of education. There's a young character who comes into contact with an older character who educates him in profession that deals with secrets. (This is twisted in *The Hellfire Club*, where Dick Dart becomes a sort of horrific teacher.) And in *A Dark Matter*, Spencer Mallon styles himself a teacher.

He's a bad teacher.

With the exception of Lamont von Heilitz, who is a good teacher, all these other teacher figures are horrifying. In the case of *Shadowland*, even Coleman Collins is only one half of the education Tom Flannigan and Del Nightingale are receiving—that terrible boys school they attend, is the other half of it. This is something that you return to every now and again, this idea of the horrors of education. I know that you did some teaching, yourself, and that you've continued to teach throughout the years, so I wanted

to see what you might say about that.

I hadn't thought of things that way but what you just said is very accurate. If I were standing on one side and outside, I would say, "Well, clearly this writer has an authority problem." It is absolutely true that I do tend to resist authority and try to figure out ways to get around it or move under it, while all the time appearing to be perfectly compliant. This mode of behavior begins, like everything else does, in childhood. My father was sometimes erratic, sometimes whimsical, always pretty self-absorbed, self-involved. He wasn't always perfectly reliable. At other times, he was astonishingly reliable, and breathtakingly helpful sometimes. He was capable of stepping into a difficult situation and facing it down, of simply standing up to whatever was there and making things go his way. I wish I were like that. It's sort of John Wayne-like. And he in fact was a bit John Wayne-like, also a bit Robert Mitchum-like. That's probably all I have to say about my father. So for me, fathers tend to be an irresolute, unpredictable bunch. When I was thirteen or fourteen, I got a scholarship to a boy's school way across town from where I lived, like sixteen miles from where I lived. And I was delighted by that. The boys in that school wore shirts and neckties and jackets every day. I

didn't mind that. I liked the whole idea. And so I went, and that school was the basis of course for Carson School and every other time I write about a boy's school. It was Milwaukee Country Day. It did me a lot of good; I learned a lot. But the headmaster was I think untrustworthy and the school itself—though I didn't, I couldn't verbalize all this until decades later—the school was helplessly anglophile. They worshiped everything that is English. That is on the surface; that's what they did. We didn't have grades; we had forms. We didn't have teachers; we had masters. We had prefects. We had daily chapel. And there were those jackets and ties. In reality the school wanted nothing more than to turn out replicas of the parents of the students. They wanted little Horness Figure, Jr. to grow up to be Mr. Horness Figure, Sr., and take over Figure Tax Preparation. That in a way was what it was for. So boys who were very, very badly behaved, who were rancorous and semi-psychotic, were often rewarded by the school because they were good athletes, and were clearly going to go into the bank the way their fathers and grandfathers had, or take over the law firm, or the company. I was fascinated; I was intrigued. It was exactly like Scott Fitzgerald. Everything Scott Fitzgerald writes about the Midwestern boy going to Princeton and meeting Princetonians and then going back

to his town in the Midwest—everything he says rings a bell with me. I liked school. I've never really taught creative writing except for one month. I met a class once a week in the Columbia MFA program and we talked a lot about stories and *Conjunctions* 39. It was great. I was crazy about them. They were fairly mature for students, but not in their thirties, yet, and they were great, and I continued to meet them after the month ended and they were passed over to Katherine Harrison. I still continue to meet them on the campus in a room the English Department gave me, to have sandwiches and just talk.

I brought in Jonathan Lethem; I brought in my editor; I brought in my agent. I brought in all kinds of people to explain things to those students. And then more recently, Chip Delany invited me to Temple for a week in the creative writing department. I rather nervously accepted and, right on the day I was supposed to go, Chip Delany had a serious medical emergency and he required an operation and he couldn't go. So I went and a colleague of his, named Don Lee (who just published a great book called *The Collective*), had to take me in hand and I met students in a group once or twice and then I met them individually and went over their stories and all I did was to pound into them certain rudiments about writing clearly. Some got it; some loved it; there was one guy that

hated everything I said because I didn't like his story, and I thought he didn't write at all well. He thought he was a genius. I didn't serve him well. But I did serve others very well. I'm going to do ninety minutes of creative writing in Amherst's summer program called Great Books. It's for really smart high school students. So that's the kind of teaching I do. I was a very good teacher when that was my job. I was so good that my first year my students picked me up and carried me through the hall. I weighed a lot less than I do now. In fact those halls were the halls of what had been the former Country Day. My old school amalgamated with a coed school and with a girl's school in town. There were only three secular private schools in Milwaukee, and then they all became one and it's now called the University School of Milwaukee. And it's a really, really good school. It's not anglophile anymore, and they have some really good teachers. I had like three dazzlingly good teachers I'm very grateful for. But I'm glad that I didn't have to teach creative writing for a living and join an MFA program. Something happens in there, something traumatic takes place, so that eventually many, many people end up writing only for other people in MFA programs. Gradually, they're published by meaningless presses, and they're never really in the world. And, like all sequestered tribes, they don't like the

real world. They're suspicious of people like me. I never wanted to have a job—once I quit the teaching job, I was officially going to Europe, to get a PhD, and I tried to do that for a while, and that would have implied that I saw a university in my future and I'm damned glad that there wasn't a university in my future and that my PhD thesis turned into a novel and I was able to do exactly what I wanted to most which was to support myself by writing. It didn't used to be so difficult, but it always was difficult. Now it's well-nigh impossible; though there are people who do it. Have you ever heard of Ben Percy? Do you know the work of Ben Percy?

Ben Percy? No, I don't.

You really should. He's a very young guy, by which I mean he's probably in his early thirties. He teaches—I can't remember. He just got a better job. He's from a primitive place in Oregon, the high desert, a town called Bend, and there are a lot of fist-fights in the town of Bend. I think a lot of alcohol. And Ben Percy's writing always has this sort of horror undertone. His first novel was called *The Wilding*—it's a good novel with a horror undertone, about people going out into the woods. His

short stories often are horror stories. They're not marketed that way. And this in the context of people who make a living by writing: he proposed a trilogy, of which the first book was almost all written, about werewolves, of the werewolf seen in a fresh way, the way Justin Cronin used vampires. And the first is called *Red Moon*. Anyhow, these books went up into auction and he made a fantastic amount of money.

Good heavens, that's cheering.

You see, it can be done. His accountant told him that he couldn't stop soon because the money is going to be spaced out over a long time and his expenses might grow and he really ought to have a steady income and of course benefits. So he stayed in there teaching but, if that had happened to me, I would have said, "Okay, now I'm set. I really don't have to work. I mean I really don't have to have a job." It's very interesting you mentioned Dick Dart. And I guess poor Nora does go to school with Dick Dart, in which she learns how a psychotic thinks about the world.

Look for part two of our interview with Peter Straub in the November 2012 issue next month!

John Langan's latest collection of stories, *Technicolor and Other Revelations*, is forthcoming from Hippocampus Press. He is the author of a novel, *House of Windows* (Night Shade 2009), and a collection, *Mr. Gaunt and Other Uneasy Encounters* (Prime 2008). His short fiction has appeared in several of John Joseph Adams's anthologies, including *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, and *By Blood We Live*. He's also published stories in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and in other anthologies including Ellen Datlow's *Poe*, *Supernatural Noir*, and *Blood and Other Cravings*, and Jack Dann and Nick Gevers' *Ghosts by Gaslight*. With Paul Tremblay, he co-edited the anthology, *Creatures: Thirty Years of Monsters* (Prime 2011). He teaches courses in creative writing and gothic fiction at SUNY New Paltz, and lives in upstate New York with his family.

Author Spotlight: Jonathan Maberry

Erika Holt

In “Property Condemned,” you return to the haunted town of Pine Deep, the setting for your first trilogy of novels, *Ghost Road Blues*, *Dead Man’s Song*, and *Bad Moon Rising*, and also revisit some of the same characters. Did you always plan to return? What drew you back?

My fiction career began with Pine Deep, and I suppose in one way or another the goings-on in that sad little town have been brewing in my head for years—probably since high school, which was way back in the 1970s. I grew up in Philadelphia and as soon as I got my license (and a junker of a car), my buddies and I would drive out to the country, visiting small towns like Lambertville, NJ, and New Hope, in Pennsylvania. Back then, the towns were isolated, tucked away in remote corners of farm country. Now most of the farms are gone and there’s in-fill everywhere. But when I sat down to take a swing at writing my first novel, I knew I’d want to build it around the towns as they were back then. However, I didn’t launch into fiction right away. I spent the first twenty-five

years of my career writing magazine feature articles, how-to manuals, plays, greeting cards, and college textbooks.

Finally, in 2004, I sat down to write *Ghost Road Blues* and its sequels, *Dead Man's Song* and *Bad Moon Rising*. I created the troubled town of Pine Deep, basing it on New Hope as it was back then. Pine Deep has the reputation of being the most haunted town in America. There are more things there than the monsters we meet in those three novels. So . . . yeah, I have plenty of Pine Deep stories I want to tell.

Malcolm is a fascinating, tragic character; a child who hopes to see ghosts in order to deal with his existential angst, and who wants to believe in a lucky stone though his life has been anything but lucky. At the end of the story he seems to embrace the destiny shown to him by the house, even though it's not a happy one. Why is that?

Malcolm Crow is the protagonist of “Property Condemned” and the star of the Pine Deep trilogy. He is a tragic character, but ultimately a heroic one. He hits bottom several times, but ultimately he rises to become a good man—one who will risk anything to protect his family and his town.

In “Property Condemned,” we meet the boy who has yet to become the adult version of Crow. As a child, Crow is the victim of some pretty terrible abuse by a drunken father. In the story, Crow catches a glimpse of the damaged adult he’s going to become. He accepts that truth because in a twisted way it offers a thread of hope. Abused children often don’t believe they will ever have a future, so catching a glimpse of one—even a bad one—makes them believe that they will outlive and outlast their current abuse. It’s damaged thinking, but it’s common. When creating Crow I drew on my own childhood experiences with a violently abusive father. I didn’t think I’d ever grow up, and I would have grabbed at any vision of the future that proved I was still alive.

What are your thoughts on destiny?

I’m New Age-y enough to believe that there are forces at work in our lives, but I don’t pretend to know exactly how they work. I believe in the power of positive thinking and the power of intention. At the same time I believe in free will and random chance. I don’t believe that every second of our lives is already mapped out. With precognitive events such as those explored in “Property Condemned,” I

view them as glimpses of possible futures. After all, not all of those predictions will come to pass.

The story seems to suggest that real-life horrors, and the psychological scars left behind, are scarier than any ghost could be. Would you agree, and is this an important theme for you?

Funny thing is, as much as I make a living writing about things that go bump in the dark, I don't particularly fear them. Ghosts have very little track record for doing much harm, and I'm not afraid of a spirit that would slam a door or change the temperature in a room. Big yawn. Fictional spirits are different in that they are vehicles in which we can tell different kinds of stories. The vampiric house in "Property Condemned" is actually less frightening than the emotional/psychological harm people experience every day. Abused children, victims of rape, victims of terrorism, families living in abject poverty: those people truly understand terror. Given a choice, most victims of abuse would probably swap for being victims of a poltergeist-infested house.

Do you have any more Pine Deep stories or novels in

mind?

Apart from “Property Condemned,” Pine Deep is the setting for “Material Witness,” a novelette tied to my Joe Ledger thriller series. And I have at least a dozen other Pine Deep short stories planned for the next few years. I also have several novels outlined, some prequels, and a few sequels, including a young adult spin-off that I’d like to write.

What are you working on now?

I’m busier than a two-headed cat in a dairy. I’m writing the fourth novel (*Flesh & Bone*) in my Rot & Ruin series of young adult, post-apocalyptic zombie thrillers. I just sold three more novels: the sixth in my Joe Ledger series; a sequel to last year’s adult zombie novel, *Dead Of Night*; and a standalone thriller. And I’m writing *Marvel Universe Vs The Avengers*, the third four-issue story in my Marvel Rage Virus series. That debuts at Halloween. And I have three novellas and nine short stories to write for various anthologies, ranging from steampunk to heroic fantasy to mystery to straight horror. That’ll keep me busy until the end of November, and then I start writing my fifteenth novel. I’m also in regular discussions with a

couple of major movie studios about writing some original scripts, and we're about to drop the word about the recently purchased film rights to one of my books. So . . . I'm in the fast lane, living on caffeine and adrenaline . . . and having a blast.

Erika Holt lives in the cold, white North (i.e. Calgary, Canada), where she writes and edits speculative fiction. Her stories appear in *Shelter of Daylight* issue six, *Evolve Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, and *Tesseract Fifteen: A Case of Quite Curious Tales*. She has co-edited two anthologies: *Rigor Amortis*, about sexy, amorous zombies, and *Broken Time Blues*, featuring 1920s alien burlesque dancers and bootlegging chickens. In her spare time she works at the public library.

Author Spotlight: Laird Barron

E. C. Myers

“Frontier Death Song” seems to draw on your personal background as an Iditarod racer and fisherman in Alaska, which comes across in your vivid descriptions of the frozen wilderness. Can you tell us more about those experiences, and how they influenced or inspired this story?

I raced the Iditarod three times during the early ‘90s. I’ve traveled across thousands of miles of inhospitable terrain, endured blizzards, open water, and attacks by wild animals. It wasn’t difficult to put some of these experiences to work in service of an adventure tale.

There is a long history of stories about the Horned God at the heart of this story. How did you go about researching the mythology and creating your own modern spin on it? What drew you to this particular literary tradition?

I’ve always been interested in world mythology, especially Norse. Late in 2011, I packed up my faithful

hound Athena and drove an old truck pretty much non-stop from Montana to New York State. The story came to me as I visited a rest stop in Wyoming—two a.m. and a winter breeze rolling out of the Bad Lands. Later, I was relating to fellow author John Langan that I really wanted to write a chase narrative. Our conversation eventually led to “FDS.” The Wild Hunt fits perfectly as the agent of pursuit for our hapless narrator . . .

The protagonist of this story is a writer, and some characters bear names similar to real-life people in the SF/F community. Are you trying to blur the lines between fact and fiction, or does this autobiographical approach help you relate better to your characters? Or are they just fun Easter eggs for observant readers?

I'm writing a sequence of tales that all deal with incarnations of a central character and all reference Alaska. Some of these stories are quite intentionally meta. Of course any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Horror stories often don't end well for the

protagonist. Do you consider the ending of “Frontier Death Song” a happy one? How do you manage to incorporate moments of humor and strike a light tone in such a grim and grotesque tale?

Yep, by my standards it’s a pretty upbeat ending. I’m a proponent of humor amidst tragedy. Black humor, gallows humor, whatever you care to label it. I come from a long, sardonic line. My people have always found humor in suffering. If you don’t laugh, you gotta cry and all that.

What work can readers expect from you next?

I’ll have a third collection out in 2013—*The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All*. Details pending. Between that book and anthology/magazine appearances, I’ve over a dozen pieces of original fiction due out over the next year or so.

E. C. Myers was assembled in the U.S. from Korean and German parts. He is a graduate of the 2005 Clarion West Writers Workshop and a member of the writing group Altered Fluid. His short fiction has appeared in various publications, including *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *Sybil’s Garage*, and *Shimmer*, and his first novel, *Fair Coin*, is available now from

Pyr. He also blogs regularly about *Star Trek: The Next Generation* at theviewscreen.com and at his website, ecmyers.net. When he isn't working, writing, or editing, he plays video games, watches films and TV, sleeps as little as possible, and spends too much time on the internet. Follow him on Twitter @ecmyers.

Author Spotlight: Genevieve Valentine

Lisa Nohealani Morton

You're usually known for your speculative fiction, but "Good Fences" is a work of existential horror, with no obvious speculative elements. Was the experience of writing this story very different from your other work?

Not particularly; a story of any sort has a psychology, and beyond that it's just a matter of degrees.

When I read "Good Fences," I found myself wondering how far down the rabbit hole the main character's madness went. It seemed obvious that his interpretations of the story's events were colored by his growing paranoia and feelings of persecution, but as the story went on, I began to speculate about how many of the events actually happened—whether there was actually a body, for example, or if the main character really was the one who set the fire. I even wondered for a while if Peter really existed. In your mind, do the events of the story occur more or less as described by the main character, or is something else

going on?

That's definitely the question the story poses to the reader—whether the narrator is affected by an actual series of events that horrify him into inaction, whether his inaction begins to eat away at him to the point of inventing this punishing self-terrorism, or some combination of those banal and loathsome two. (Any reading of the text damns him pretty soundly, though.)

The central image of the story—the burnt-out, crumbling car—starts out seemingly emblematic of the main character's sketchy neighborhood, but later becomes a concrete representation of his deteriorating mental state. Where did that image come from?

From exactly that—the car is both a very solid and familiar mechanism of daily life, and a symbol: prosperity, safety, escape. Aside from the physicality of something that's been burned falling to pieces, there's the cognitive disconnect that so personal and valuable a possession would be abandoned; as the car falls apart, so does he.

What scares you? What sort of thing makes you get up and turn on the light in the middle of the night?

Charlie Sheen and Neil LaBute still get work. That's scary stuff.

What do you have coming down the pike as far as writing projects go?

I just finished up a novel and am knee-deep in research for the next one, and have a few short stories coming down the line (including a story about London's Great Exhibition coming up in *Queen Victoria's Book of Spells*)—and, as always, I plan to write at length about delightful and/or terrible movies, whenever I can.



Born and raised in Honolulu, **Lisa Nohealani Morton** lives in Washington, DC. By day she is a mild-mannered database wrangler, computer programmer, and all-around data geek, and by night she writes science fiction, fantasy, and combinations of the two. Her short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Lightspeed*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and the anthology *Hellebore and Rue*. She can be found on Twitter as @lnmorton.

Author Spotlight: Sarah Langan

Seamus Bayne

“Afterlife” seems to focus heavily on alienation, not only of the main character, but thematically throughout the narrative. The depth of abuse and the detachment from reality which the protagonist experiences create a sense of horror, not of the supernatural, but of the material world and its treatment of Mary Hogan. Was that your goal at the beginning?

I wrote this story about eight years ago, and, though I loved the premise, couldn't make it work. Then, about three months ago, I realized the problem. I'd been skating the line between psychological and true horror—I'd never answered whether it was all in Mary's head, or a true haunting.

Once I answered that question, I could move forward. Basically, I got stuck on symbolism, which is silly. I mean, whether it's ghosts or psychology, it's a symbol. You don't lose anything by clarifying plot.

As for alienation, that's where my life was back then. I can't imagine that brand of misery these days, since my

house is so full of life, which is one of the reasons I think this story works. It's got a young person's angst and an adult's cold eye.

The fact that Mary has never seen the ocean is repeatedly hammered home. What is the importance of the ocean to Mary?

Growing up on Long Island, I went to the beach pretty much every day during the summer. Then when I got older, I went there with my friends every night. It's a fond memory. The ocean is an islander's delight.

What's strange about city living is that people forget their natural surroundings. Queens is in on an island. So is Manhattan. But nobody ever goes to the beach, or even looks at the water.

The city swallows some people. It raises them on mesh wire teats—they can't drive, they can't talk to strangers, they can't navigate any place but the local deli. Like Corrine Hogan, it's Mary's prison.

I think the ocean would be freedom.

The protagonist is slowly revealed to the reader, the eventual reality of her world coming into focus late in

the narrative. Was there a goal there to build rapport with the reader before revealing her as person?

I like the idea that she's so rarely out of the house that she doesn't see herself properly. We're in her head, so we wouldn't see her, either. Given how she grew up, she's surprisingly sane.

I've read that you're from Long Island, and currently live in Brooklyn. The location of this story has a strong presence and is well realized. Is there a real place that was the inspiration for, or that provided background to create, the dark, intricate, and atmospheric feel of Mary's world?

I lived on 48th Street in Astoria, and it was a dog show. The carpet was dirty, deep pile that messed with my asthma. The landlord had a mail-order bride from Russia. I'd been trying to get published for several years with zero luck. This nut next door fed chicken carcasses to the pigeons, so our lawn was covered in meat. I ate tuna out of a can for dinner because it was both nutritious and cheap, and worked as an assistant literary scout, where I got yelled at a lot and typically went the whole day without eating or even drinking a glass of water because

no one at that office would give me the break. So, hmmm.

On the plus side, there was this great donut shop on Broadway and 46th called D-Lite where they let me smoke, drink coffee, write, and eat chocolate-coconut glazed donuts, all at the same time!

We love this story—do you have something else in the works we might see in the future at *Nightmare*?

Yes! A story called “In India, they Worship Cows” has been accepted for publication sometime down the road. It’s about a woman haunted by her mother’s very strange ghost.

I’ve got a three-year-old and an eight-month-old. Once they’re in school and daycare part-time starting mid-September, I should be able to finish my fourth novel, *Empty Houses*. The break from working on it initially frustrated me, though I think coming to it with a fresh perspective will make it a better book.

Seamus Bayne got his start writing during the late ‘90s, working in the role playing game industry. He is a graduate of Viable Paradise writers’ workshop, and is the co-founder and host of the Paradise Lost writing retreat held annually in Texas. You can learn more about him at seamusbayne.net, or follow him @Endiron on Twitter.

Coming Attractions

Coming up in *Nightmare* . . .

Future issues will contain work by bestselling and award-winning authors Ramsey Campbell, Sarah Langan (a second story!), Jeff VanderMeer, and Daniel H. Wilson. Plus, we'll have stories from exciting newcomers such as Desirina Boskovich, Tamsyn Muir, J. B. Park, and Matt Williamson.

If that lineup of forthcoming fiction sounds good to you, the best way to ensure that you never miss an issue—and the best way to support the magazine—is to subscribe to our ebook edition. So please consider doing so, and tell a friend!

It's another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And while you're at it, tell a friend about *Nightmare*. Thanks for reading!