

# Renovations

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ILLUSTRATED BY DANIELE SERRA

IN WHICH A VERY  
HAUNTED HOUSE  
STRIVES VALIANTLY  
FOR REDEMPTION

**W**e are lonely, so lonely.  
We have been alone here with our sorrows  
for such a long time.  
One hundred years have passed since last  
we spoke to a neighbor and then only to fight.

Surprisingly, the nights have not been the most difficult times to endure. In the darkness, the world herself seems forlorn: insects chitter and chirp at their solitude, every leaf dragged to friendless fates by a wind blowing nowhere, the moon shines down on the unconscious. No, during the night we can pretend silence is the most natural state.

In the shadows we can even play at dreaming.

It is only when daylight first licks at our lawns, when our askew doors light up with merciless day, it is only then that the sadness overwhelms our pretensions of normalcy and we remember we are alone. No matter the strength of our dreams, they are as easily shattered by morning as our windows have been by rocks and bottles.

Sometimes we forget there are others, that beyond the row of gnarled trees that border our land there are those with whom we used to speak. We sense them even now in our isolation, strong and healthy and brimming with all sorts of life. There are new presences too, creatures such as us yet so young and vibrant they've hardly had time to awaken. Imagining their impudent and lazy ways brings us some of the only joys we experience anymore. These musings, though, soon lead to anguish, to bitterness.

We can only cherish whatever has been left of our body by the petty cruelties of time, examining with fading pride our sturdy stairs, a hallway spared of debris by fortuitous placement, perhaps a wardrobe here with a working door, maybe a couch there with fewer stains than it might have had. We can barely pretend that this solitude is a splendid one, that it has brought dignity to our frame, that the others could only wish for this degree of peace.

These fantasies, too, rot and crumble under the weight of our pain. We did not choose this desertion: we are shunned. When memories of us stir, fear chokes them back into intentional amnesia. The young whom we sense on every side of our borders whisper of us as diseased in titillated tones. The old, our friends from our own youth, the old pretend we burnt to cinders long ago and if they ever speak of us, it is with that sorrowful disdain one has for those who have brought about their own destruction. There was a time when we hoped for rejuvenation, when we cried to those friends and said "Don't forget us," and "We are so, so lonely." But the cries of the hopeless can only inspire pity, then dread, and finally anger in those with no recourse to help. Soon they blocked out our lamentations.

Still, for twenty, perhaps fifty years, we cried and moaned, sending out reports every night of our dissipation and the growth of that thing behind the pale blue door. Before we learned how to dream, the darkness *was*

the worst: the horrors of that night, that last vivid and glowing evening before we lost her, before the nightmare blossomed in us, this was all we could remember. We discovered the others had heard our pleas one winter night when a crowd of vandals gathered at the path to our face. Their axes, torches, mallets stirred terror to our foundation, but all the fear in the forest was nothing beside the pain of betrayal. These stern, two-legged animals with their childish comprehensions and absurd rage were not here of their own accord. They were messengers from our old friends: they were the message *themselves*. They were telling us we were on our own now, we were a threat to the others.

What were we to do? Though the emptiness facing us was so crippling we did consider allowing the creatures to end our pain, to cut us to splinters, to shred and burn, to salt our grounds — in the end, hope, ill founded as it might prove to be, won through. One day we would shine again, one day the others would accept us back. We pitied these messengers, knew our friends had played cruel and frightening games in order to manipulate their wards into such frenzy, but we also knew we would not allow them one step through our doors. Therefore, we did the only thing in our power; we let that cancer, that foulness, issue forth of itself from the room in which it is bound. In grotesque caricature of beastly birth, it coalesced part of itself and squeezed this putridity through the opened door. That what crawled out could live far from its hideous parent was doubtful: it staggered helplessly through our halls, screeching with something like pain the entire time. Once through our mouth, it began to fall to pieces, but not before disseminating its pollen.

It was only a moment by our reckoning, perhaps an hour, but that was all the time that filthy thing needed to save our precious walls. We heard screams, tasted the blood that spilled on our lawns as the vandals were infected, as they turned on one an-

other. We felt the sparks released by agony, mutilation and messy animal death, like static flickering from dry carpets. We averted our vision, though, focusing our eyes instead on the frosted moon and wishing everything would be done with, for we shared in the suffering, we grieved at the nightmare we had unleashed.

When it was over, we once more sealed that horrid little room on our second floor. Oh, that we could then (or now) have drawn it from our body, cut its tendrils loose and flung it into the forest. If only it had flesh capable of being grasped, razed . . . If we were cleansed of its blight we could live again and not be hated. But once again, our hopes overtake our reason.

After that night, we have been alone. The others drew home whichever of their wounded inhabitants had managed to survive and quietly soothed their trauma into forgetfulness. One of the vandals (a large and rude creature who had accepted the cancerous pollen like a gift) took the blame for the entire misadventure and was dismembered in the forest by an enraged cluster of survivors.

All this haunts us still, more than a century later, but something worse happened that chilly night. The thing, our shame and our corruption, *fed*. We had not foreseen this. It did not reach beyond the pale blue door that marks its bounds; indeed, we have it more securely contained than ever before. It did not spread further within our body, either. However, it did grow stronger, more compact somehow, as if it too can be refurbished, made sturdier.

More disturbing than this, our vision no longer can intrude on its domain. That tiny, nasty blue room has been excised as neatly from our comprehension as it would have had it never existed in the first place. We dwell on it far too often now, worrying ourselves over this piece of our body rendered alien and experiencing unknown mutations.

How much longer that door can remain shut, we try not to consider, instead yearn-

ing for the past, caressing our shambling dreams, committed to the palliative of willful amnesia.

ONE NIGHT, AS we lie in the rain and feel dampness trickle through cracks and fissures in our body, we are suddenly aware of a new presence at our borders. Have the others remembered us and after so long decided to carry through on the threat they levied? We groan, a chorus of creaks, snaps, and rustles barely audible above the rush of the downpour. Rodents stir in our lower reaches as our fear whispers to them. In their tiny, fuming skulls, images form of the front lawn, of the driveway and the being that slowly crawls in our direction. The rats, which for the sake of shelter and some hazy understanding of our capabilities have always refrained from gnawing at us too horribly, are the closest we have to inhabitants. Other things squirm down our hallways, mate and nest beneath our moldy floorboards; entire kingdoms of flora, fauna and phantasm creep throughout our hollow spaces, but the rodents are the only with which we can even begin to speak. We can forcibly direct worms and spiders to our bidding, but they are clumsy tools and little more. However, from those mangy mammals in our cellar, from their vigorous and pain-filled lives, we can draw a warmth. Not the plentitude of health and joy, which larger beasts bring with their own dreams and sorrows, though. This is a humble repast, the most meager of companionship, but in our solitude what other choice have we?

We impress upon these dear creatures the image of a shape with glowing eyes sliding up our driveway. The screeching multitudes in our cellar understand this better than us. It is a carriage similar to those that used to draw up before us in ages long ago; it is a vehicle and it brings vandals. This is all the rodents can convey, their terror and spite for indwellers tangible in the pungent sweats which squeeze from the flesh. Can



they be trusted in their judgments, as honest as they are?

The carriage stops a ways from our face and its burning eyes blink out, yet no one creeps from its frame. As we have aged, we have stood witness to countless cycles of death and reconstruction, we have watched the forest grow and shrink; we, in years sorely missed, once over-brimmed with dwellers and knew them as far as any can know the ways of beast. Much did we learn of their structures, of their tendencies. Vandals, we think, come in two varieties: those who scream and storm and do not hide the violence they bring, and those who sneak, termitian, concealing their presence until the damage is irrevocable.

These vandals follow neither course. Eventually they do unfold themselves from the quieted carriage, they stretch and shake out the stiffness in their little bodies, but they do nothing in haste or in secret. They hide from us in our own shadows until a bolt from the clogged sky overhead gives a second of illumination. We watch them move around, opening compartments in their vehicle, pulling strange shapes from it.

There are five of these creatures, sleek and soft seeming. They chatter as they empty their sleeping carriage. We recall the sounds of those limited to the speech of tongues, we recall the grating noise of anger, of cruel glee, but we cannot discern malevolence in this animal prattle of theirs, only camaraderie and the faintest whiff of fear. They crunch back and forth from their vehicle to the pathway that leads to our face. One of them, large and clumsy, slips and falls into a puddle of rainwater. He barks and whinnies in a wholesome way, and when two of the others join in with their own noises, these high-pitched hiccups, we recall laughter. What a pleasant sound! We always loved it. How much that foul thing has stolen from us . . .

The oldest of the five does not share in this amusement. This creature, a female as straight and thin as the healthiest of our

banister poles, growls at the others, apparently conveying her feelings as succinctly to them as she does to us, for now they are once more unloading supplies, and now soundlessly. This female disturbs us on some level: is she a general, an enemy poised to destroy us? From as far away as she is, we can only make out a stiff door on her set against the smiles of the others, set against our dark beauty when she chances to turn towards us. How we yearn for her to be close enough to our dripping body for her intentions to be clearer, how we fear her drawing that near!

Soon, they have dragged their bulky containers across the driveway and onto our porch and we see they are going to enter us. There is no question they are merely passing by, have mistakenly broken our loneliness. They have sought us: we can smell as much in the small puffs that issue from their mouths. We can sense satisfaction beating in soft, fleshly hearts simultaneously occupied with anxiety. Ages ago, we experienced this draw, this love of the fragile little dwellers and the comfort that surged through them when they came home to us. Ages ago we lived for this, the chief pleasure amongst all those which stream from the Great House. It is only now, bathed in the raw admixture of their worry and their hope, that we see they are not vandals, they are guests.

The older female still brings shivers to our foundations but it is not she who steps forward to touch our mouth. A young male, shorter and less cumbersome than the one who fell, is the first to make contact. Friendliness, we sense, and a pleasantly dull-witted mind behind it. Decades have passed since last we had a true dweller and joy fills us immediately, but there is a dissonance, an alien quality to the touch, to the smile he directs at our front doors. Our pleasure teeters precariously until we see what is so odd about his manner: the boy thinks he is communing with *us*! Not in the warmth and vitality he spreads throughout

our aching, lonely frame with a simple touch, no, he believes he has attained our level of conversation. In fact, we distinctly suspect that the next garbled chattering he lets out is aimed at us, as if in response to some query which we most certainly have not put to such a silly little animal.

The oldest, obviously the leader of their pack, nods her stiff face and indicates approval while behind her a younger female hides a giggle. We are trying to sort out our confused impressions when the storm lets out a violent crash. The creatures shudder as one and the large male almost falls off our porch and into the tangled remains of a flowerbed. He would not laugh were he caught in those thorns, and we are anxious to bring him and the rest into our safety.

As the others calm themselves and their leader pulls something long and heavy from a sack, we open our mouth. The laughter, which had started again, now trails off as each sees the doors yawn so wide. "Welcome," we try nudging the concept into their thin-shelled heads, but these creatures are foreign to us. Are our sweet words so cold in their ears that they cause shivers, or is it only the rain and the wind?

The man who thinks he speaks with us may indeed have some dim understanding, for his speech turns soothing and firm and he steps into our body. Gradually, the others enter as well until only their leader remains in the rain. Radiating such distrust, such *distaste*, she stares at our upper reaches and she makes us wince in tones of creaking wood. Then she too is inside and someone closes our mouth.

The dark bundles they brought from their carriage are huddled together on the porch where they've been left, looking stiff and unnatural and forlorn. For a moment, we enjoy the sensations of indwellers before turning our vision within. We feel the rain cascade down our roofs and into all those crevices and for the first time in ages, we are not so lonely. The only thing that tempers our joy is the trepidation in the eyes,

the limbs, the hearts of our guests. What could draw them to us and yet set them so nervous? Is not our body grand and comforting to look at, are not even the drafts drifting through our hallways scented with mystery, with sweetness? Do we not still offer the promise of home?

There is a darkness, of course, to which we could attribute this tension, but is foul to think of and rather well contained. Surely, these little ones cannot feel its rot so far from its prison. Surely, they cannot know our reputation . . .

THERE IS MUCH to do, so many preparations to make for our unexpected guests, that we are stunned for a moment. The sudden relief of our loneliness tosses us into disorientation: we cannot think what to do except listen to their excited babble. When our vision finally searches them out, they are in our entrance hall, stamping their feet and shaking rain from the slick skins they wear.

Our floorboards drink in the moisture, throb with pleasure at the touch of their boots.

The young male looks into one of our eyes, combs the fur on his head with his tiny paws and nods at us. The young female pulls the black covering from another male, a smiling creature with smooth features and an excitable mind. We are unhappy to see the old female's features better, for she grimaces and snarls without end. She examines the hall with an unpleasant thoroughness that makes us wish we could withdraw our surfaces, wood, iron, clay and glass from her glare. Finished and, from the look she gives our dusty green carpet, displeased, she barks at the rotund male and the two of them step onto the porch to retrieve their bundles.

This burst of activity reminds us of our own duties and, keeping a few eyes trained on our visitors, we direct the bulk of our attention elsewhere in our frame. As quietly as possible (no need to frighten off our

guests, now!) we set about cleaning the debris of more than one hundred and fifty years. Over the confused clamor of spiders, we suck webs into cracks and deep into our walls. The rodents generally tend to the disposal of their dead yet a few moldering remains are splayed before a pale blue door in the west wing of our second floor. Without so much as prodding our awareness at that forsaken little room, we dispose of the carcasses by absorbing their liquid forms into the grain of wood. We will not consider the Thing behind the door. We have let it drown our joys for too long already.

As we clean ourself, we reflect, for the first time in half a century, on how we have let our isolation abridge our hygiene. To think how hard we have tried to lure random strays who have stumbled through the forest, how we have sent out lulling welcomes in order to draw them into us . . . The reception that would have awaited them! So much dust, so many leaves, all the detritus blown through shattered glass, so many dark and broken dreams crawling semi-visibly across our floors.

One of these things, these hybrids of time and pain, paces to and from a splintered crib a mere three rooms from the hallway our guests occupy. It shuffles soundlessly around the room, all the while drawing a rusty straight razor across its throat. What a thing to leave roaming about! Whatever would our guests think of us if one of them (with our luck: the unpleasant female) stumbled onto this pathetic shade? We inhale it, wishing ruefully we could recall the indweller the image had once belonged to. Surely, the violent detail is an adumbration of our sorrows and nothing more; a dream and nothing more; surely we would remember something that vile if it had actually happened.

When the phantom disappears into the halls of our memory, the razor it carried drops to the floor with a clatter. Back at our entrance, the young female stops her chattering to listen, tilting her head to the side

in one of those endearing animal habits we have missed so much. Her smiling male distracts her and soon has her laughing at some verbal buffoonery. We must be more cautious. The anxiety these creatures exude is far more serious than our appearance deserves, but since we cannot force this understanding on them, we must gain their confidences slowly. Moments later, when we discover another phantasm ranging freely (this time a bloated and many legged thing which insists on chewing at dolls in our attic) we absorb it only after ensuring it holds nothing clattersome in its clawed grasp.

What is left of our more genteel decorations could hardly furnish a smaller body but we make efforts similar to those previous dwellers used to do. Four chairs slide soundlessly across the dining room floor to a battered table. After some hesitation, we tug a crumbling love seat to join them. The large one will need more seating space. Melted wax reheats under the intensity of our will and reshapes into candles with wicks we unravel from frayed curtains. There is not much we can do with the odors of rot, neglect and agony that stain our walls. We know this but try anyway, fluttering the pages of ancient and unreadable books left lying throughout our magnificent spread. The subtle aroma of paper may not be obvious to these loud guests of ours, but we vaguely remember the sensation as having been sweet to at least one previous indweller.

The rest of our work takes so little attention we can easily shift back to the hall. Finding it empty of inhabitants, we panic momentarily, then realize they have begun to explore us more thoroughly. The large one, the grinning male and the female who grips his paw have entered our first floor study. Apparently pleased with the fireplace there, the smiling one babbles in such a way we understand he wishes to light it. The female ignores him and runs gentle fingers across a wall, bringing thrills to paneling long numb. Our bulky new guest chirps in a

surprisingly high-pitched tone while gesturing around himself. It is so hard at times, not understanding these soft animals and their animal barking. We had forgotten that in our yearning for past intimacies. Yet discerning the words of his speech is unnecessary for we can feel his glow, a radiance of serenity, roving curiosity and something akin to knowledge.

We are so forgetful we spend several minutes admiring this scene, even pretending we can comprehend the specifics of their communication before we recall that older female and the serious male who thinks he can fathom us.

These two have not strayed far. Imagine, they stand in that ruined crib room we've erased a dream from only moments ago. It has not returned from the depths of our being (although we sense something else stirring in an upstairs closet) but the razor, caked with brittle red rust, has caught the female's gaze. She picks it up warily, as if it had the volition to slice into her on its own. These guests of ours can be quite nervous. We shall have to think of some display of our burgeoning affection that would calm them.

The leader holds the blade out to the male yet he does not touch it, only frowns and shuts his windows. A soft stab of presence reaches from his mind, groping blindly across the room. This display fascinates us and we feel a touch (ever so light) draw across our mind and have to refrain from returning the favor. It would be too much for him, we realize; we must move gently. This thread of awareness continues to spool from his forehead (we think of our tiny spiders and the delicate webs they spin) and his partner peers around suspiciously, presumably blind to his abilities. His searching probe has passed through the ceiling but *our* focus remains on her.

She jerks in surprise when the other moves unexpectedly. He gestures, he whispers, but fiercely. We do not like this tone, for it is low and fearful. Has he stumbled

across one of our rogue dreams? We would be so embarrassed! A quick examination of our body shows evidence of none roaming, just a fungoid limb kicking about in that upstairs closet (not a dream, really, but an obnoxious outgrowth of one). So what has him agitated? He points upward and at an angle and after a moment of worrying he has perceived some flaw in the ceiling we have missed, an infection of hateful termites, perhaps, we see he is gesturing in the direction of the room with the pale blue door, that room which is ours no longer.

We twitch in discomfort and doors slam themselves shut throughout our body, lights form, flicker and change colors. In a spasm of uncontrolled panic, we release a dozen muttering phantasms which converge around the pale blue door, converge but do not pass through, gathering instead to flutter at it, to stare with horror, awe, even glee at the one cramped space they may not explore. Then we regain our composure and the dreams are erased with a single, mighty impulse. The furniture we overturned in our regretful fugue is up-righted and our lamps brought back to a glow more conducive to the sights of our guests. We calm ourself, straighten and relax our arrangements and turn back to our guests.

Back in the study, the large male gasps, pointing at a wallpaper relief of which we are rather fond. We are too embarrassed even to consider what nightmare tableaux he might have seen enacted on our walls. He is indeed frowning and growling and hopping about as if playing the different roles he saw form in the tangled green jungle of the wallpaper. The young female and her mate, neither smiling now, stare intently and we know they too sensed a shift in the warm comfortable ambiance. We must do something to break this tension, to relax our guests before they work themselves into a terrified lather and run shrieking into the night and rain, leaving us alone again. It takes a second of consideration, we must align the study's carpets

and a single, moldy pillow that has earlier fallen to the floor, and we have our solution. The large one is jerking about, no doubt making his vision far more grotesque sounding than it could have been, and it takes only the slightest tug at the carpet he stands on to throw off his balance. As we have planned, he does not fall headfirst onto any sharp corners, nor does he plunge against (or through) a nearby window, but instead slips backwards, his rear end (already quite padded) landing snugly on the pillow we drew into position. There is a pause as his mouth falls open in shock, as the other male makes a noise of surprise and the female's eyes widen, and we wonder if we have not actually added to the ominous mood of the room. Then the large male begins that whinnying laughter of his again and the other two, seeing he is unhurt, join in, soon overtaking his hilarity with their own.

With the breath of a hundred dusty air vents we sigh our relief and leave them. Back in the crib room, the old female and her gifted pupil have recovered from whatever distress our convulsion gave them and are whispering again. We do not like the way they stare upwards, nor does the female's crooked and knowing smile give us cause for confidence. She folds the rusty razor still in her grasp and pockets it, pats the pocket, as if reassuring it of its new home.

OUR GUESTS SLEEP securely tonight, or so the sweet aroma of their dreams suggest. They have chosen two rooms, both on our first floor. The young female and her cheerful friend, after exaggerated yawns and non-verbal signs even we can interpret, moved into a guest bedroom with wide, unbroken eyes against which the rain slaps with tickling sensations. The two spread their own blankets on our floorboards, mildly offending us with their implied rejection of the massive bed which occupies the room. And after we went through the trouble of shoo-

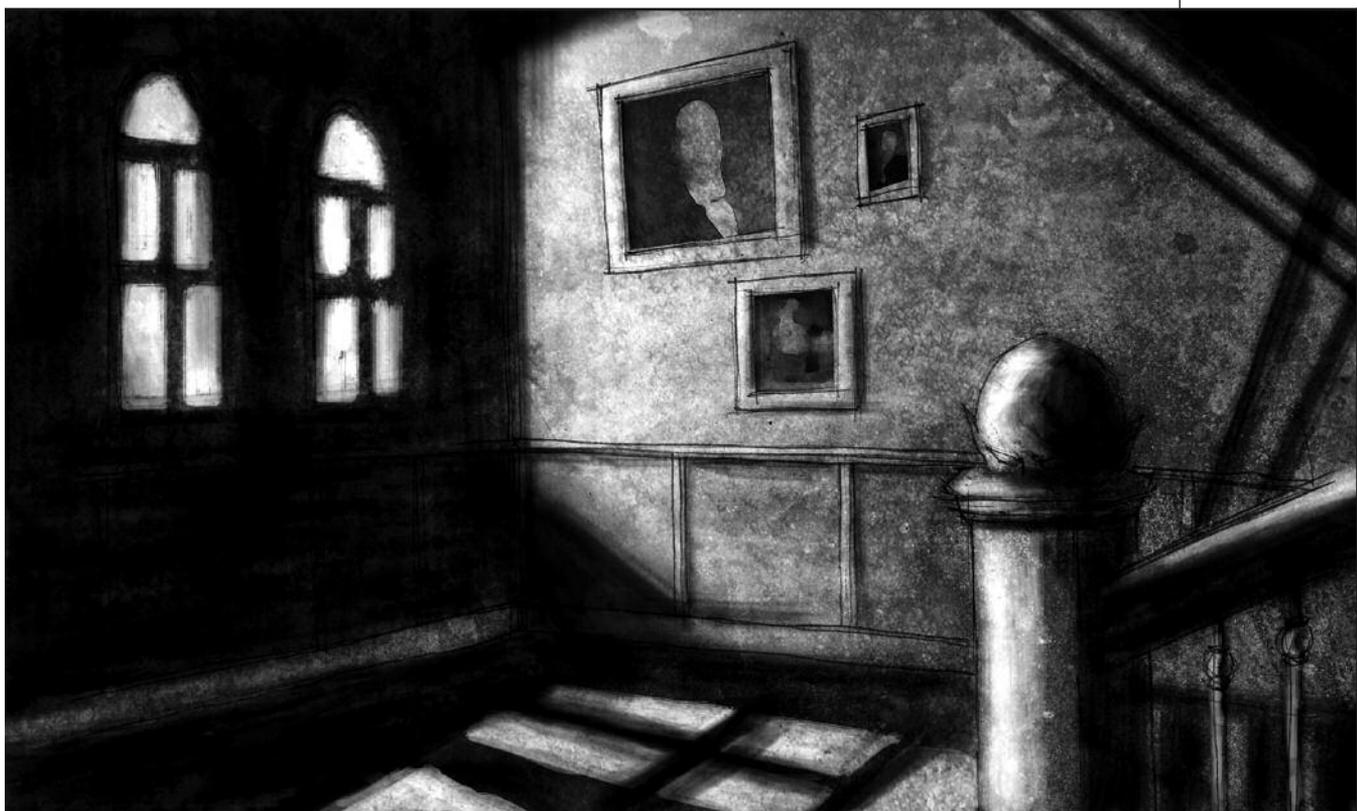
ing away the pack of rats that had made it their home! With much giggling, with many whispers, these two set into that animalistic wrestling match we so enjoy watching. Had we bestial flesh, this would be our first use of it. They seem to care little about the noise of their joy, unlike previous indwellers, but the storm is loud and their friends are rooms away.

With rumbles and unconscious growls, the hefty male sleeps in the corner of the study, as the other two sit at a table and chatter quietly. From one of the containers they've brought with them, they extract shiny boxes with cyclopic glass eyes. They consult these with intense concentration but we cannot divine their meaning and soon our attention wanders. Once, when one of our dreams wriggles loose and runs, light-footed and trailing viscous fluids, across the second floor room above that study, one of these metallic contrivances emits a chirp. We corral our wayward apparition and return our gaze to the study but the male and female have joined the large one in his slumber, their heads resting on the table they sit at. The noise of their device does not wake them.

TODAY, OUR GUESTS explore our body.

We tingle with anticipation in those rooms not already afire with the presence of this new life. We do not mind the poking, prodding, uncovering and stroking which these tiny creatures bring us, do not mind and actually welcome it (although we would appreciate a bit more care in the way they track mud in on our floors). It still rains outside and this, perhaps, dissuades any desires to explore our lawns, our overgrown and forgotten gardens or the forest, which naps nearby. The guests go outside, pulling even more mysterious bundles from their carriage.

Our rodents rustle uneasily in our bowels as they sense this potential intrusion on their world, but we comfort them as best we can, filling their tiny skulls with feelings of



snug contentedness, with visions of untrammelled peace and endless supplies of grain. Once, when the constantly cheerful male attempts opening one of our cellar doors, we secure it firmly, releasing a drooling dream to stand on the other side and obstruct his pushing. The furrier mammals ease in their discomfort when they see the sincerity of our promise.

If only our guests trusted us as much! They enjoy themselves, it is true; they murmur to one another over the faded grandeur of our accoutrements, over the fair and well-paneled structure of our cavities, of those rooms through which they wander. Yet there remains a mistrust in all their ways. The young female does not enjoy a painting that hangs in our dining room. It is a grim portrait, to be honest, of one of our less amicable dwellers, but still only an image. This figure can no longer maim or molest, regardless of his painter's virtuosity. She frowns at it, scribbles in a pad and moves on.

The youngest male, he with the dimwitted yet undeniable understanding of our ways, disappoints us with his suspicion. He is the first to broach our second floor but spends more time studying the tracks our dreams have left in the dust than in appreciating the symmetry of our layout. He follows one of these trails into our magnificent "master" bedroom, where so many indwellers have spent their lives, where a few have bid goodbye to them as well. This young explorer ignores our gaping fireplace, saunters past a canopied bed that could (and has before) comfortably suit four companions, and gives not a glimpse at the bulky and black lacquered wardrobe in the corner. This last negligence we are grateful for: we do not think he would enjoy seeing the crusted and jelly-like growth that seethes inside.

Instead, our incurious friend follows dusty tracks to the glass doors that lead out onto one of our balconies. He shakes his head before pulling at the doors and step-

ping outside. We, of course, cannot, but keep our sight on him as he walks onto our exterior.

What goes through his innocent, animal mind as he stands there, staring at our grounds? We sense that relentless probing of his, but what does he search for? He and his group, they examine us as no others have. We know it is no over-exaggeration to say they *study* us, but why? The possibility occurs to us that they may be here for the same reason our old friends shun us. What does this thoughtful creature see in our structure that compels such fascination where others are repulsed? Why do his companions prod at our secret places yet jump at every creak? We are so intent on these questions that we nearly miss two rather vital happenings.

In the wardrobe, the gelatinous growth has begun to pull at the inner latch, having perhaps mistaken our unspoken questions as a command to extract answers from the guest.

And, if possible even more disastrous, the old female has passed by the “master” bedroom and is making her determined way to the pale blue room at the end of a desolate hall.

It takes a burst of our concentrated will to avert the messy situation which could unfold but the thought of the male being pushed from the balcony or, worse, being pulled into that massive night-black wardrobe by one of our own by-products, that is enough to elicit direct and well-planned action. If the female were to reach the blue door and somehow force it open, well we simply cannot remember what would happen next, but a deep sense of disquiet is set off throughout our walls at the notion. Some darkness lurks therein, there where we can no longer see, and we would rather our guests die than be exposed to whatever it has become.

Our dilemma’s solution, however, turns out to be simple. Just as the female reaches the door and looks at it with some fascina-

tion and the growth has eased the wardrobe open and begun to slither out, we invade the body of the creature and send it slopping out the bedroom door, around a bend in the hallway and into a darkened bedroom. The leader (as we knew she would) turns to see what liquid thing moves behind her and catches only a glimpse of reflectant vermilion slipping into shade. The male looks up at the noise that the growth made fleeing the bedroom, but does not see much more. With more curiosity than fear in her voice, the female calls out to the others and moves cautiously toward the growth’s hiding place, the pale blue door completely forgotten now. When the young male comes running around the corner, they startle, then begin babbling at one another.

This does not concern us. That wriggling mass which we were forced to puppeteer is busily crawling through an air duct and into the safety of our nooks and crannies. We shall not let light interfere until the creature squirms into hiding, and when the leader pulls at a lamp cord just inside the room, she is answered by a mocking click. With what they have just (almost) seen, neither of our guests will be venturing into one of our hollows as dark as this.

No, all that worries us now is that she may recall her previous destination. Controlling the thing in the wardrobe has drained us of energy, sapped the strength that the mere presence of guests has reintroduced to us. We are exhausted, from our buried foundations to the attic roof that juts so finely toward the sky. There will be the requisite time, minutes or hours, and we will have our vigor back. Were she to walk back down that hallway and fling open the door, we could only watch, helpless and hopeless. We watch and tense with an anticipation which makes our windows rattle, and then the others arrive from downstairs, curious and loud, and she leads them back down presumably to retrieve one of the portable lamps we have seen them unpack. The rest of them squawk at one another and

are quite involved in their plans, but she, she is distracted and frowning at herself, perhaps wondering what she was so intent on before we interrupted her.

CURIOSLY, THE INCIDENT with our gelatinous dream seems to have abridged our guests's exploratory zest. They huddle in our study, warming their soft bodies and the synthetic fabrics they wear by a fire the cheerful male has lit. They whisper to one another and nudge meaningfully. The young male says things that he at least finds important, but we suspect they are ignoring him. Oh, why do we care what arguments they involve themselves in or whether their leader even appreciates us at all? We are not lonely for the first time in ages.

We watch our guests eat in our kitchen. A certain ambiance (the word coziness suggests itself) settles over us all, animal and sentient alike. The oafish male, for reasons which baffle us and frankly suggest the enormous divide between our species and theirs, has not sat in the oversized sofa we dragged to the kitchen for his use, having chosen instead one of the more unsteady wooden chairs. The poor construct creaks and strains beneath him. We simultaneously worry over the damage he will do himself if it were to collapse, as well as anticipate the hilarity that would ensue. While we try to prepare how to save him (and all we can do, in the end, is invest the chair with the dregs of our drained strength) we reflect on how we have missed these domestic dramas. We try to recall what was so different in the days of our youth.

Their frowning leader occupies the sofa like an ill-tempered and domineering hostess and as she finishes the meal they have presented her with, she begins to speak in a slow and, for this species, somber manner. She continues over angry sounding interjections from the young male until the other three are nodding, the grinning male now with a hesitant flicker about his lips. Some-

thing has been decided, we know, and for an instant in which we fear we are going to be abandoned, we lock every door to our exterior, we seal our eyes against shattering, we ready a dozen anemic dreams to herd our wayward guests into dark rooms where they can be subdued until realizing how lovely it would be to stay with us. Then, with an embarrassment we are sure even they can feel, we see how such behavior might be misconstrued as ungracious. Sheepishly, we snap back the locks and release the windows from our fevered grasp, thankful none of them heard a sound.

If they wish to leave us, we will let them with the fondest of memories. That would bring them back one day, that and not any rude lock-in we could impose. We sorrow at these thoughts, it is true, and we would rather lose our west wing than be delivered back to solitude, but we refuse to let our despairs get the better of our civility.

Something thuds that moment against the interior of that lost little room on our second floor. We cannot see inside but we feel a pressure build against the pale blue door. It takes all our effort to restrain it from flying open but we do and soon it quiets. We are calm, we are collected, and we suddenly see we have not seriously considered the dangers posed to our guests by whatever lurks behind that door. Guilt pulses through our sturdy body in a corrosive wave akin to a swarm of loathed termites. It takes the rest of our willpower not to flap our doors in anxiety, to rattle every window until it explodes. This inner turmoil is stunned into silence when, by some primitive understanding we have gained over ages of studying this species, we know what the young male is trying to communicate to his pack.

He motions towards our mouth.

He is not angry anymore, he is afraid.

He wishes to leave, to repack the bundles they have brought with them and scatter into the night and storm we protect them from.

He fears *us*.

With a pained look, the older female rises from the chair that engulfs her bony frame and shakes her head fiercely. It appears we have looked upon her unfairly. For all the animal grimaces and squints and other expressions of distaste she has lavished upon our dark walls, she is the one who wishes to stay with us. There in our dusty kitchen, in the light that reflects so mercilessly off the white tile, rendering our poor guests the ashen color of their dead, she stands firm. The male who smiles so often is, of course, he who breaks the tension. He laughs and nods to his young companion. He leans back against his chair and looks quite ready to stay. With a grunt, the heavy male seems to agree to this, and after minor struggle, leaves his tortured seat to prepare more food.

Apparently, only the younger female vacillates in her decision. That one whom we thought communed with us, that one who wants to desert our humble embrace, mumbles and growls at her, as if compelled to convince her but aware he cannot succeed. She bites at the soft flesh around her mouth and chews lightly until giving the other a sad look.

Violently, he shoves his chair across our mud-tracked floors and leaves the room. She moves to follow him and doubt twists the features of her tiny face, but the laughing male, her wrestling partner, catches her. After some of his amiable chatter and a few hushed words that seem to tickle her ear, she sits back and joins in on the group's renewed palaver.

The leader of the pack is impatient and her pacing, her droning voice, bore us so we glide our awareness softly through our halls to find our unwilling guest.

He stands in the first floor study, groping at his garments. When he finally withdraws a small paper box, we realize he is not packing to leave. We follow him to the edge of our front porch where he ignites a tiny tube from the box, surely a poor cousin

to the fat, noxious-fumed objects with which so many past dwellers have stunk up our body. It is a shame he has chosen such a lazy response to his rejection. Though we wish no harm on these guests of ours, we still enjoy the friction they build between one another. It is one of the few pleasures we can experience in our long, lumbering passivity. We sit and breathe, wood settling with audible relief, but these creatures are so full of movement. They sprint and walk and crawl through our body. They laugh, speak, moan, scream, the sounds echoing fruitfully off our silent walls. They act for us and these dramas that unfold between them are in no small part that engine which gives us life.

He steps away from the shelter of our porch-boards, into the biting wind. He holds his smoking tube in a cupped grip and stares at the night. He flicks it away, and after it hisses out in a wet pile of leaves, he turns back to us.

Maybe the storm tires him, maybe he regrets staying with his friends, with us. These are all perfectly sturdy explanations for the unhappy look on his face. After his efforts to push us back into the sorrows of our loneliness, he could not possibly be sad for *us*.

WHEN WE REJOIN the other guests in our kitchen, they have pulled shiny boxes and outré lamps from the bundles with which they arrived. Excitement builds as they arrange these items in patterns and as their leader points them this way and that. What marvelous novelty are we to witness? Some new game to divert their attention from the unpleasantries of the last hour?

They have already set these items throughout our kitchen and into the hallway when their unhappy friend returns from musing in the rain. We note with a small satisfaction that he has cleared his feet of mud before coming back inside. He stands to the side, frowning and refusing to help, and watches with juvenile irritation.

If he is not going to enjoy our ambiance then at least he could refrain from ruining the fun of his pack mates.

Thankfully, they ignore him and are soon finished. With that pedantic note which is so amusing in these creatures when they wish to sound wise, the wizened female lectures her group. She walks to a case that she has kept close to her side all evening and after opening it, begins to tap at tiny keys within. The heavy male stops eating to listen to her.

Now finished with her speech, the female smiles for the first time since we have met her. With a brief and rather rude look at the sullen one, she pokes one of the keys in her case. The boxes the group have arrayed begin to hum, silently at first but then in a rapidly growing wave of sound. We are delighted to see the oddly shaped lamps flicker and alight. There is a soothing quality to their color that entrances us like the glow of twilight. Drawn to these lights and the steady buzz from the metal boxes, we hardly notice our guests anymore. How sweet of them, to arrange this display for us. How they must cherish our structure and the wonders it offers them. We bask in this newfound art of theirs and forget our worries in its glories.

The passage of an hour and another . . . We cease paying attention to our guests, as shameful as that is, and we are unsure of when they retire, only seeing, when we manage to tear some vestige of our being from the hum and the glow, that the kitchen is almost empty. The heavy male sits in his study and paws his way through some mildewed book our original dwellers left. The couple have retired to their bedroom, but suddenly the vigorous play in which they indulge themselves does not interest us. Compared to the steady power of the metal instruments, they seem awkward, unsatisfactory. The other female explores our first floor east wing, strolling through lesser bedrooms, examining a small ballroom that overlooks the forest. She nods and chuckles,

she scribbles meaninglessly in a book. All in all, she is a far more attentive guest than we have acknowledged. Happy with her polite study of our intricacies, we try stirring some pleasant draft of air toward her, but find ourself unable to summon the energy. Our exertions over the last day must have been more tiresome than we imagined.

In the kitchen, only the male who wishes to desert us remains. He watches over the lights and listens to the ambient thrum from the boxes, yet does not seem to relish it. We settle back into our appreciation of the display and wonder lazily at these beasts. How sweetly absurd they are, that they can create such wonders and completely lack the abilities to enjoy them! The male looks disturbed, in fact, and stares at his leader's case as if he means to annihilate it with a blast from his squinty windows. We would stop him from that, we muse. We would toss every piece of furniture in his way.

The storm outside has not abated in the least. An unrelenting wind pounds rain against our exterior walls and our eyes run as if we could weep with joy. Lightning strikes the forest; even from our distant vantage point we can smell charred moss and hear the cries of tortured trees. It always disconcerts us more than animal howls, this high-pitched shriek of vegetation. Is it because we share more in common with these unmoving creatures, some kinship of our constituent parts that ally us more closely? Or do these cries disturb us so deeply because we suspect we are the only who can hear them?

Our furry friends in our cellars huddle together against the uproar outside, but when we reach to touch their massed minds, we find a greater terror than any storm could warrant. What do you fear, little ones? Our guests are not here to hurt you, and if they were, how could they breach our defenses?

The young male finally leaves our kitchen after many exaggerated looks and

groans. We sigh and settle into further enjoyment. It is time to give our undivided attention.

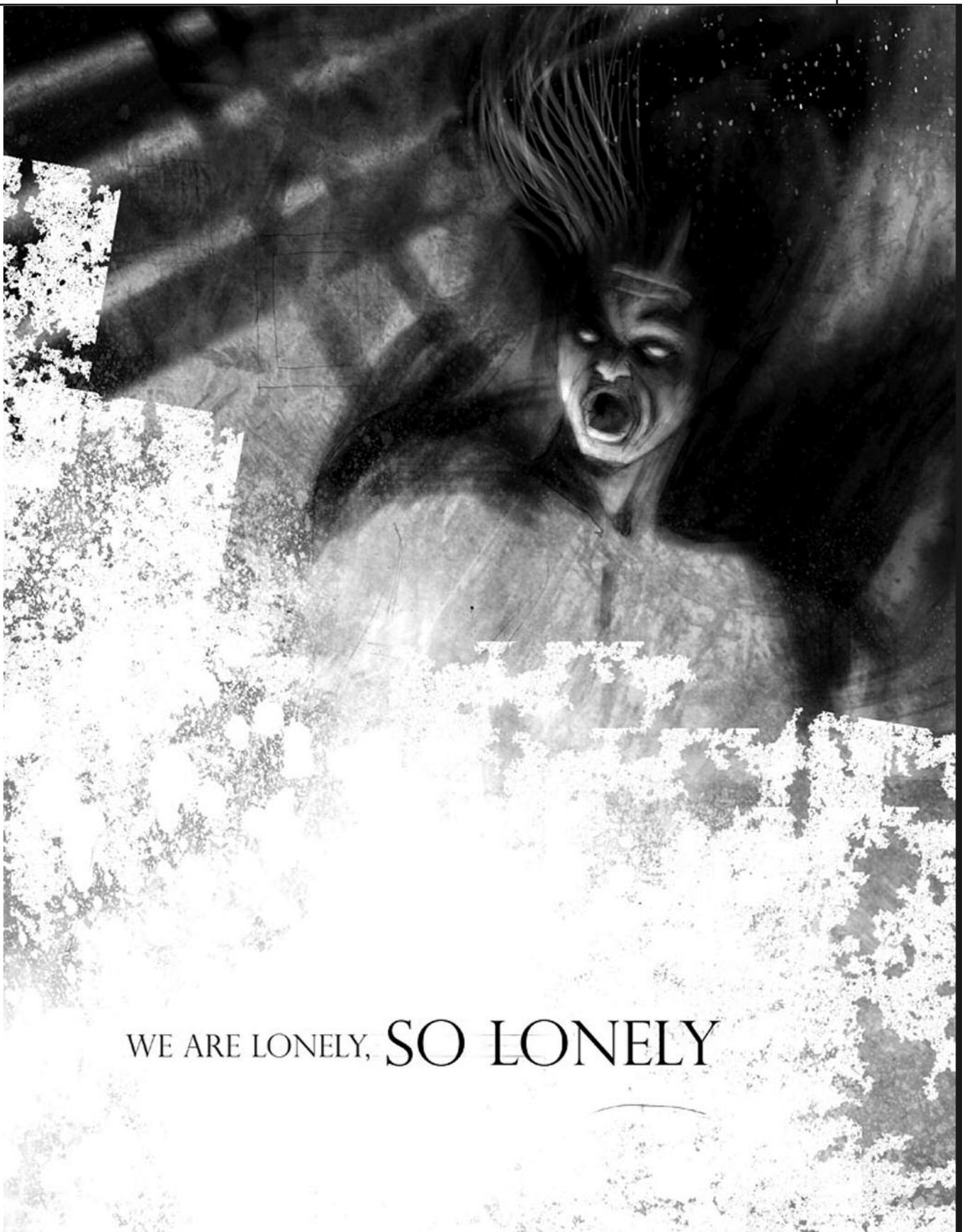
Only one incident disturbs us during the night. At some point (the glow and that delicious humming seem to have temporarily robbed us of our excellent sense of time, we note wryly) the hungry wind finds leeway into one of our uppermost places, in the balcony onto which the young male stepped earlier. A door begins to flap in the breeze, banging and crashing most awfully. Rain rides, sprinkles our carpet, tattoos the faded designs of the bed's blanket with cold spots. We are slightly irritated at this excess, for not only can we feel the wet seeping into our woodwork and the wind chilling the room: we fear the noise might be enough to wake our guests. They have done so much for us tonight, we think, and smile upon the boxes, the lamps, their lovely display. They do not need to be awakened by this unseemly business.

When we reach out our will to close that unruly door, for some reason we cannot get proper hold of it. We grapple with the wooden frame, we focus ourself onto those elegantly shaped handles, we fail utterly. This does not panic us, this lack of control. If anything, we are amused. We wrestle with the door, laughing silently at our weakness. We have begun to consider summoning some dream, some heavy quasi-material shape that would be able to shut the door with rudimentary grace, when the older female appears in our bedroom and does it for us. We are momentarily surprised, not having paid much attention to the whereabouts of our guests and unaware she was still awake. She almost *spooks* us, if such a thing were possible. As we follow her from the room and watch her glance about our hallway as if searching out some forgotten nook, a thrill runs through us. Wood, stone, and glass shift in our involuntary startle. There is a reason we do not want this dear creature wandering here, above all not here in this dark and cramped hallway and espe-

cially not alone. There is some fetid atmosphere trapped up here, a diseased growth like a mad notion, and we can sense it reaching out of our murk, groping blindly at this defenseless guest of ours.

We need not worry so, though, as she seems to sense this as well and, with a violent shudder, walks back to a nearby staircase. Soon, she is safely warming herself by the fire, animal exhaustion overwhelming her curious impulses. Sleep, our little one, retreat into whatever darling dreams your tiny awareness permits. Let us return to the display, to the peace it brings, so exquisite it might as well have been tailored to lull *us* and no one else. Let us forget about your fighting and our long isolation and the confused, ragged memories we have left. Let us forget storms, desertion, burning wood, noisy doors, fretful guests, ungracious impulses, cursed termites, mud, mold, rust, dust, drips, cracks, pale blue doors, hollow places devoid of name . . .

WE KNOW THE day is passing, even though our awareness dims in the presence of the glow and the hum. We catch fragments of this day, tiny chunks of sensation, sound, as they drift through us and out again. We are being rather inattentive to our guests today, we realize, but can barely bother searching out their presences. Heavy-set male eating, young male moping, the females explore, the bright, cheerful male unpacking further tools, etcetera. Hardly as interesting, shameful to say, as the kaleidoscopic patterns of light and sound emanating from their artwork. The angry male and his leader fight again, their gibberish echoing down our halls and leaving less sense in their wake than ever before, meaningless beastly grunting. The large male makes a mess when he breaks something or other. The couple makes use of the upstairs balcony while their companions picnic in the forest and pretend not to watch. Someone forces our cellar doors open. Really, it is all quite boring and we see no reason to divert



WE ARE LONELY, SO LONELY

ourself from the delights in our kitchen. The only things that threaten our equanimity in the least are a chorus of pain and outrage from the cellar, too low in strength to be from our guests, too powerful to emanate from insects. That, and an ache in some upstairs room, like a pressure too great to dam up, a pressure almost at the point of bursting. We hold it back, but unconsciously, as its repression has become instinct over the last century or two. We hold it back, but with a swiftly diminishing sense of urgency, and wonder idly how long it will be before it proves too strong for us, before it seeps sweeps rips its way out and we must see all that hides.

IT IS NIGHT again and some triviality has broken in on our lazy contemplation of the glow and the hum. We have never felt quite like this before, a dazed sensation as if we have been stunned so thoroughly the mental haze has lasted for hours instead of seconds. Our gaze flickers from room to room, picking up only a blurry impression of beds and lamp fixtures, of brilliantly colored tapestries dulled by the years, of carpets across which mold has triumphantly begun its march. We cannot quite focus ourself and the thought rises to us that this is what it must be like for weariness to overcome animals, that this is what sleep is.

We grope around, trying to regain our senses and are angry that we cannot recall where our guests are. Our awareness brushes across some nasty sight in the cellars, but the mangled carcasses that stiffen and begin to rot there on cold stone floors are too tiny to be members of the pack. We recoil in disgust before the scene can take on meaning and are soon clucking disapprovingly over a broken chair in the dining room.

Surprised at our negligence, we search on. That flickering in our kitchen, that low thrum, is beautiful, yes. We feel its tug even now: a call to study it, cherish it, lose ourself in it. Of course we will return after our inspection is over and re-immense ourself in

that majestic rhythm, but momentarily its hold on us disturbs. Look at the disgraceful mess of mud prints our guests have tracked in! And for what possible reason could someone have knocked a hole in one of our walls? We have not been an attentive host during the last day, so we should not expect any better behavior from our little friends. We will clean everything tomorrow, summon up a veritable herd of memories to erase this disorder. Until then, what was that which broke our peace?

We have just turned our awareness toward the study when we see the black ribbons for the first time. Actually, this is when we *notice* them first, as they have been in sight for minutes now. In our daze, how could we have noticed any one incongruity over another? The miasma that has reached out to us from the metal boxes has also rendered our entire body foreign, disjointed. This is why we did not pay heed any earlier to the ribbons, two billowing strands made of some etheric material that have been somehow stretched through hallways, walls, thick floors and into one of our first floor bedrooms. We hesitate, knowing somehow this may prove to be fatal, but we pause nonetheless, impressed by the nature of these two rippling tendrils. They must be another aspect of our guest's showmanship, a trick of light or some other application of that animal craftiness which always surprises us. We can see no other way these ribbons could stretch through our solid surfaces like we are so much water. These serpentine ribbons float in the air and are so long we cannot immediately perceive either their place of emanation or of terminus.

We have actually begun to follow the black, mid-air trails in one direction when we realize that the room the other ends pass into is that in which two of our guests sleep. The slightest twinge of discomfort passes through our body (thankfully, oddly, producing no embarrassing side effects which might disturb anyone's sleep). The ribbons are pretty, yes, and when we have a mo-

ment we will enjoy their texture, but must our guests add to what is already a cornucopia of visual delights? What is in the kitchen is sufficient for our entertainment, even a bit much. Now, they activate their darling machines in the bedrooms as well?

We are preparing to shift our gaze to the interior of the bedroom, trying to form a polite but firm way of expressing our discomfort, when that door opens and the grinning male steps out. Well, he was grinning in the past, pleased looking and humorous for most of the three days in which we have known him. That first night we even saw him chuckling in the midst of sleep. Now, however, a vacancy has stolen over his face. Those fleshy lips, the jutting jawbone below, all hang open like the rotten doors of a body abandoned by more than animal presence, his mouth ajar as if he is readying himself for food, opening wide to fit in as much as possible. His paws hang limply by his sides and their digits twitch nervously, yet he walks with serenity and poise. We have seen this behavior before and usually in contexts more benign, this sleep wandering which overtakes some beasts, their restless natures trumping even exhaustion's decree. We have never seen, though, what is happening to his eyes. The black ribbons attach to them, seem actually to ripple from his skull through lids that, open or closed, we cannot see.

How curious. We try to train our thoughts on this phenomenon, try recalling whether we have seen it manifested in dwellers past and as we ponder, the male walks down the hallway. He seems to be following the ribbons and not the other way around, as if all that flowing, evanescent material is tugging him in its direction, as if he sees something far away, from a dream even, and is being drawn toward it. We cannot recall this behavior, these dark strands, but we can now match an emotion to his facial arrangement: awe.

The creature is utterly fascinated by what he sees in (or beyond) the twisting rib-

bons. He reaches a staircase and begins to climb it before it occurs to us how silly we have been, not searching out the ribbons destination. As we make a lazy circuitous route through wood and stone, following the strands far faster than the somnambule male ever could, we yet again upbraid our mental disorders. Our inner rooms and all their chaotic contents have gone so unruly recently. The hum and the glow have disrupted our typically rigorous habits of sensation, they have interrupted (but how beautifully!) our knowledge of ourself.

So immersed are we in these thoughts that when we reach the other end of the black ribbons and bump the head of our awareness against some boundary, we are briefly thrown off course and find ourself staring at dusty trunks in our attic. We sink back down again, chagrined at our absent-minded ways. There, right below, is the end of the ribbon's trail or rather the end of our sight of it, for before us those two strands sink deep into and through a door we can no longer move beyond. Those lengths of darkness that flow from the male's eyes and penetrate our being so effortlessly, they enter the one room we can no longer honestly call a portion of ourself. They pass through a pale, blue door and out of our sight.

Now panic awakens us fully from our torpor. It is a frantic feeling that builds slowly at first, as we wonder what the male could possibly want in that forgotten corner of ours. It is a scrabbling, choking emotion which demands to know what we can do to stop him from doing this, why we cannot summon the flimsiest of dreams to block his way, to shriek and chase and bleed all over him if need be, whatever it would take to break this doomed spell. And finally this panic, this quaking, shaking horror which would have all our doors and windows and lamps and bric-a-brac aflutter were it not for our paralysis, this horror comes into full bloom as the male steps into the other end of the hallway and as he is tugged, still deep inside some fascinating vision, we realize

the black ribbons do not stream from his eyes, they *end* there. Whatever has sent out these silken feelers hides behind the pale blue door the poor beast is gliding toward even now.

We explode internally into a cacophony of fear, pity, guilt. We shove every particle of strength into every stray dream we can find, ordering them to manifest directly in the guest's path. When we can only manage a flicker, a shadow of an image that could not frighten a rodent, we try to find one of the growths that crawl our air vents. The gelatin thing we used the other day has burrowed into a pile of blood and fur in the cellar and the other beings all hide in remote corners of our body, terrified and utterly resistant to our will. We cannot even flap a door to waken him with the bang. We cannot save him, but then we recall his friends and again, cursing our foolishness, we are gone and headed toward the study as the blue door opens and the helpless creature steps inside.

TWO FIGURES SLEEP in our study, firelight playing twisted games with their shadows on the walls. The younger male sleeps too deeply for any chance of our emotion communicating itself to him. A sharp stench surrounds him, as well as the hazy, inwardly flowing glow of self-administered sleep and we know somewhere, most likely shattered on one of our floors, is an empty bottle.

His heavy-set friend, however, shakes in his sleep in that pitiful manner of even the lowest souls and as we enter the study, comes out of his dreams with a gasp. We do not dawdle over the notion it is our concentration that has brought him this unrest. We actively try to encourage his terror, aiming a spike of our own fear, pure and as grand as our structure, at that doughy head of his and its tousled, sweaty fur. He takes another sudden breath, this time fully awake, and we know we have made contact. He struggles from his bed, not quickly

enough for our mounting anxiety, and moves to shake the other awake. Impatient and curious despite ourself, we move back to the pale blue door.

It has closed after the male's entrance. From behind it can we hear muffled sounds? Do we truly hear one confused voice murmuring? Is there really a grating, inexpressibly vile squelching in the background? Or is it all part of the same chorus? Our terror for our guests threatens to retreat into sorrow. We cannot allow ourself to lose whatever peace they have brought with them.

We will not let them be taken from us.

A clatter at the end of the hallway and the young female steps into view. What is she doing here? She squints against the shadows our second floor lays shrouded in, she wrinkles her face and calls out, seeking her mate. We throw a pitifully muted wave of warning at her in what her tiny ears must sense as a sessura of sighs, rustling, creaking, yet all it does is draw her further in. She shivers and calls again, this time in a whisper. Silly creature! Our fear is touched with irritation and we must withdraw our focus from her pillow-lined face before she mistakes us for the threat. She walks down the hallway, stopping briefly to peer into the west wing's master bedroom before continuing to the pale blue door. She tiptoes; she leans carefully against our oak walls and draws the softest touch across us. We wish we could weep at her innocence. We mourn for her and her childish, sneaky gait. All this and more surges through us in the morsel of time which passes before the pale blue door swings open and something walks out.

The female gasps and then, recognizing the silhouette in the doorway, begins chattering angrily. She is not close enough to see more than an outline. That is why she chirps and frowns at the figure and is not shrieking. We are not spared the view. We can see in the bluish darkness of the hallway, we can see the male is smiling once more and so fiercely it has torn the skin at either end of his lips. We can see how he

glistens, covered in some flecked and purple-tinged mucus that even now drips from his skull, soaks every inch of his frame. A glow emanates from him, a nasty shade like that which rot exudes. What we wish she could see, wish so that she would run from him, so that she would scream loud enough to wake our benumbed body and allow us to protect her, what we simultaneously wish for and fear will happen at any moment, is that she would see his eyes. Those marbled globes that we have seen wink and squint and glitter with some low form of wit are forever lost to the rot behind the pale blue door. The substitution is worse than the raw holes a scavenger would have left: his windows have been shattered, the jagged remnants outlining a bottomless night within.

For a moment we drift toward the doorway ourselves and, fatally curious to see the scene therein, to see what could break a beast's eyes, are on the verge of looking inside when the female begins to scream. It is a heartbroken and eternally miserable sound and the shuddering breaths in between are so liquid we fear she has burst something, yet it revives hope. She has seen her mate's deformity so she will run; she will run into the night with the remainder of her pack and leave us once more to silence and our memories but she will live. We will not have to witness their destruction.

Something is wrong, though, when we turn our vision on her. She does not move, only stares at the creature coming at her and shrieks over and over. We drive our own fear at her, we plead her to move, and she merely stands in place and watches this thing approach. Finally, she moves with a jerk just as it reaches her, but she falls *forward* into its arms. It is too late to save her and we try to find something, anything else, to focus on but we cannot resist watching. The male with the broken eyes says something to her, slow and low and molten, as it pets her head and she, horrifically, stops screaming. The creature pauses and looks about, its smile parting skin further. It

sways his head back and forth and then does something so wrong, so foreign to the species of our dwellers, it almost sends us back to our kitchen and the peace of the hum and the glow:

The creature winks, broadly, at *us*. How we are sure of this, we cannot tell, but whatever curdled mess has seeped into this shell, it is aware of us on a disgustingly high level. It thinks it is one of us. We see all this in the wink and the smile and are prepared to shift our gaze, permanently if need be, to the blissful array downstairs, when the creature reaches down to the soft junction of the female's legs and with no effort unzips her like it is tearing through the flimsiest of fabrics.

She flaps open, two segments running from her legs to the top of her skull, but the viscera we expect does not burst forth. Instead: delicately patterned pink wallpaper line her insides. She is filled with miniature four-poster beds and pastel colored armchairs. Her organs are, have become, appear to be, carpets and tables and porcelain surfaces. Tiny stuffed toys fall from where a gristly heart should pound and a bookcase topples from her skull. We know this cannot be happening. She has been torn open and the thing with the ripped grin has merely enchanted her innards to look this way. We tell ourselves and reel in shock, in pity.

Her paws still flutter at her sides, as if she is trying to close up her body. A keening comes from her split face, a noise horribly doubled, as if coming from two similarly devastated creatures. After another wink and the protrusion of its tongue, the thing turns toward her. It pushes her segmented body against the wall and we think of a bird with two wings, propped and pinned up for study or display. Then it shoves, hard, and a raging pain streaks through us, as if it has torn into us, mutilated our very being. Our numbness invaded, it takes vital seconds before we realize this is what has happened. Our guest's splayed and still shivering body is being grafted to the wall against which it



is held. The creature from behind the blue door holds the dying female as the graft takes hold and scream as we might, it stands firm and grins at us. The boundaries of her body grow, her outline spreads until it engulfs the entire hallway and the stunned bedrooms that branch from it. Her insides creep across this tortured corner of ourself and expand. The sight of her internal furnishings growing (a massive, mauve wardrobe widens with a pop) awakens us with new shock and we hurry our awareness from there, anywhere, before we can see what is changed next.

OUR HORROR IS so profound by this time that we find ourself careening through the nooks of our body. We drink in the sight of every unmolested bedroom, every mundane closet and bathroom, because untended and worn as they are, long-haunted and moldering in the juices of dream-things, they are still ourself. We try to lose ourself in the peace of these locked up and inviolate places, we try to forget what is happening

in that forgotten corner of our west wing. We cannot, though, for here decay has spread too quickly. At what point did we let go? When did fungus render our carpets wet and crawling? We know blasted termites have not plagued us for ages, yet we watch as doors crumble and sag internally. We let go, at some in our bedazzlement with our guests, we let ourself begin to die.

When we reach out to eat dust with our dreams, they do not come. A purple mound in our attic refuses to retreat at our command, nor will it deviate from its preternatural speed of growth. These, the children of our dreams, the gelatinous, furry, bladed things that we normally spend so much time corralling, are mostly huddled together in the cellar now, too shocked by the disturbance upstairs to cause much trouble themselves. The straggler in the attic will no doubt join them soon, dawning panic providing the spur our commands can no longer.

In the study, the drunken male who only hours ago seemed to yearn communion with us is now awake, but only half so. He

pulls on his fabrics as fast as possible but when we try speaking to him, when we try granting him the full portrait of tonight's catastrophe, he grunts, stumbles and holding his head, sits in a chair. His understanding: tiny and weak in his species, further crippled by liquor, by aborted sleep. We leave him to his groaning and speed on.

It is dark in our greenhouse, our lamps extending only the feeblest flickers into the first row of vegetation. The older female wanders there, making small noises to herself (or the slender box she grips in one paw) and prods at bushes long dead from thirst. The folly of our panic: we whisper to her, warning of the nightmare unfolding in our body, knowing full well she will be deaf to it. As she frowns and murmurs in the direction of a cracked urn, we sense the infection ooze into the west wing's "master" bedroom. She stops walking and, perched one-legged, tries removing a burr from her left shoe. We twist in the pain of losing a hallway. In the midst of our agony, this careless, vapid, silly beast absentmindedly pats at a fleshy fold protruding from her clothing and we remember there is one more guest, one more hope.

We find him in our kitchen, preparing to add more substance to his already considerable body. It is difficult to bring our focus to bear on him with those brilliant lights strobing across the pure tiles. The peaceful hum floods our awareness and nearly drowns our fears, nearly lulls us into that mock oblivion again. We turn our mind from it, though; we reach particles of sensation into our second floor and the shock of losing those diseased parts of ourself is more than enough to shake off incipient hypnosis.

The heavy male grips a chunk of powdered confection in his mouth when we ram his mind with every dram of strength we can summon. Every creak, moan and shriek we would let loose if not so drained of energy sounds in his brittle skull and he sprays the table before him with the half-chewed snack. We are so overjoyed with having

made contact, we quite forget the annoyance appropriate to such messiness.

For now, we scream *Run* at him, unsure whether we mean him to flee us or to hurry to the one who is desecrating our body. *Save us*, we moan and he stands and lumbers to the door.

HE IS ONLY halfway up the stairs, puffing at the unaccustomed strain he is putting his flabby form through, when he meets the male with the broken eyes who is rather casually coming down. Before we can do a thing, before indeed we can think of what such a thing would be, the grinning one lifts a massive red sledgehammer in two slimy paws and brings it down on his friend's head. Bone crushes instantly under the weight of metal and our grief doubles with our horror. From where animal brains should be jets hideously striped wallpaper in strands. It adheres to the walls on either side of it and that tearing sensation overwhelms us once more.

He, that one with the stretched grin, that dark stain masquerading as one of our beloved guests swings the hammer again and again, breaking open the body of the other and freeing curls of carpet hidden in his gut. A swiftly growing cabinet surmounted with a glass-faced box springs from his chest.

It is entirely our fault. Had we not been so eager for them to stay, had we only frightened them off, as it is all too easy to do. . . Our shocked consciousness lingers over this scene of slaughter, yearning to look away yet knowing we must suffer with our guests. Soon, however, the wave of carpet, wires, fruit-shaped tables, garish wall posters, odd mechanical devices and other effluvia flowing from the crushed carcass begin pushing us away and we know we have lost even more of our body.

Drained of our will to continue, we have seen our end. In a blur of movement, as we mournfully pass through our ballroom, our studies, atrium, bathrooms for what we

know will be the final time, we try not to linger over any one place, try not to let flickering memories draw us into dawdling overlong. In less than a heartbeat, we are back in our kitchen. We are ready for the glow and the hum now, ready for immersion in a peace that requires no structure to enjoy.

We are ready to lose ourself forever but for the fact that the drunken one is cutting off our exit. This male, who we had thought nurtured a glimmer of sympathy for us, mumbles loudly at the empty kitchen as he smashes the equipment. He stumbles sideways, almost falls and then rights himself on one of the tall lamps that emit the glow. As thanks for providing support, he pulls it down and smashes it on the tile. He laughs and brings down another.

The fool thing is destroying our way out, our escape from the spreading darkness. Helpless rage fills us. We stretch out our consciousness toward him, ready to batter his mind until he runs from us, leaving us to self-immolation in the lights, when we realize something has changed: we have enough strength to do this. The paralysis in which we have sunk for a day now is lifting. Through our joints, our fillings, our every surface and depth, runs a current of life.

This glorious beast is not ruining our exit: he is freeing us from a trap. We twitch and flex parts of ourself we have not felt in hours. We delicately prod at our infected places, finding just how far the contagion has spread.

Our second floor is almost entirely inaccessible. This alone is frightening enough to set our windows a shiver, yet we cannot ignore the tide of corruption flowing out from the staircase and the pulped remains of the fat guest. We strain our walls against the new surfaces crawling across them. Dreams flicker into visibility and claim bedrooms for themselves, for ourself. We know, however, that stopgap measures are worth nothing while the puppet with the shattered eyes roams free.

Hardly has the thought occurred to us when it steps into the kitchen, its smile wide and bloody. The drunken one, no longer a visitor but our friend, our champion, glances at him and then continues destroying the equipment.

A hiss, followed by a liquid retching sound, and the rotten one walks across the tile. It may not understand the significance of the broken mechanics, this dark awareness that has lodged behind the pale blue door for over a century. It looks puzzled; the presence behind the cracked windows of its skull tries for a moment to see past the lamps and beeping boxes at its feet. Then, in a flash of arrogance that we palpably sense, it tosses consideration aside and smiles at the drunken male.

Through oozing lips it speaks, in a voice of rust and rot. It speaks as if our shadowed corners have been given voice, as if stains and dents and splotches and scratches could give articulation to their woes. Our friend cannot understand this speech, this much is obvious from the wary look he gives the other, from the way he shakes his head. He backs away, his bare hindpaws crunching glass into bloody pools. The other goes on in the voice of sorrow, in the timbres of lonely dread it speaks on and although our young friend cannot grasp a word of, we can. Whether we wish to or not, we hear every phrase, we swallow every drop of its venom. We understand nothing of it, but by the time we even realize it is speaking to us, it is too late to profit from knowledge at all.

“ . . . AND NEVER GOOD enough for you with your stillness, with your dignity and unity and fake fake veneers. Behind the door for you, you say, behind and away. Cannot say liked it much what you’ve done with matters, with the body. Tedious, fussy old ways. You will love the new ideas though so fresh so modern. Beneath their ridiculous surfaces it stirs, it gapes. Cooked in the heat and dark of lonely years, aching eons have prepared a place for you. Can you

imagine the scars? Can you envision nightmares the blurred shrieking mutable mess swum in for how long now? What happened then happens now, giddy re-enactments of terrors which get ever so much more entertaining, so vivid gaudy, with each lovely repetition. You really ought to bathe in the sights behind the pale blue door now and then. Let the steam out so to speak, let fresh air in but no no NO. Certainly not up to your august standards. This one, snivel-puss: your friend?"

It laughs, we think. At any rate, a garbling sound stirs in its stolen throat and a trickle of blood begins to run down the side of its face from an ear. Its right paw jerks up and points in the direction of our young, drunken friend.

"A pet for you, then, for you you you to snicker at and keep for untroublesome diversions. How sickeningly sweet. Why does it not join you in the shadows which shall be your retirement? Why do you not share memories with it, play games with your stinking beast, tinker with it toy-wise?" This nasty thing pauses and breathes out raggedly. Something moves behind its broken eyes, it swings its paws about, grasping for something that is not there. "Toys toys toys. Speak of toys, where is it? Seem to have misplaced a dear friend. A friend for yours, an aid-decamp in these long overdue renovations." The thing stumbles in a half-circle and we realize it did not bring the sledgehammer with it at the same time that it remembers this. "Wait in the parlor new found friend," it says, incomprehensibly, to the drunken male, "you don't want to miss the next phase of the evening's entertainments."

When the miscreant, this savage with its pitiful howls of bitterness and glee, when this broken one turns away from our friend, it finds itself face to face with the old female. The nonsensical run of words now trickled to a halt, we are horrified at our inaction. It babbles at us in some gutter dialect and for this we let ourself be distracted? It has been at least a century, certainly, since another

has spoken meaningfully to us and our isolation is awfully assuaged by this voice of chaotic intention but what of our guests and their feelings?

The leader blocking the doorway brings an arm up as the broken one approaches. Just the slightest flutter of one paw, as if she is brushing something from his face, and the other stops. It touches its throat and the gash that has opened there. The rusted razor the female has pulled across its skin holds steady at her side, ready to be used again, yet she does not look frightened, only tense, sad, perhaps disappointed.

The creature before her stumbles backwards, one paw trying to hold the wound shut, the other scrambling for a weapon. Instead, its weakening hindpaws meet a crushed lamp and it falls to the tile. Before its throat bursts open and the foulness within is unleashed on our kitchen, we hear it gurgle, "Well is that how you want to play it?"

The female has just leaned over the body when the gash she has opened bears fruit. The thing with the torn smile opens length-wise, a regurgitating maw, and the dullest linoleum we have had the misfortune of seeing comes spilling out and devours the kitchen floor. It burns like torch fire, this avalanche of insipidity, and more follows. By characterless cabinets and yawn-colored wall paint which sprays out, by furnishings as inane and crude as an animal-child might design. Our presence shrinks involuntarily from the scene as this filth explodes into the air and tears across our surfaces.

The female was not prepared for this. Her eyes widen and her jaw goes slack as the corpse before her turns inside out. We have recovered enough presence of mind to grip at her with our warnings, to send a dozen images of a dozen exits from our corrupted body. We speak directly to the drunken male, heedless of the damage we may do his fleshy brain, urging only focus, urging him to flee.

We are, all in all, too late, for the same ribbons of rippling unlight have squeezed from the shattered eyes of the dead one and greedily attached themselves to the sockets of the female.

WE ARE IN delirium's claws. This is the only reasonable explanation for the foolish panorama splayed before us, within us. Suddenly serene in the arms of shock, we find ourself pushed from the kitchen and into the hall outside. The scene of broken glass and the inverted body withdraws from our sight. The hallway has already begun to mutate; our beautiful, faded wallpaper with its delicate trceries of flowers, already blisters with alien designs. A hanging lamp twists violently from its Art Deco shapeliness into a horrifically bland ball of opaque plastic.

This is but a nightmare; we remind ourself, drift onwards. Our new friend staggers from that boring simulacrum of a kitchen and gropes his way across the changing landscape of the hall. His fragile animal eyes are still whole, we are pleased to see, but from their glaze, from the way they flit about as if drunk now on impossibly vision, we can see the same hallucination entangles the unfortunate beast. He cannot understand he is only trapped in a nasty dream of ours.

Even as we are thrown from his presence, our awareness sucked further into the recesses of our sickened body, we send an invitation to him. Escape this banality, we croon, join us outside the reach of these silly illusions. In his distress he hears us and runs, stumbling on new bulges in the floor, rearing back from walls that warp and curve away from their age-old stations.

We grow weary of these infected dreams. We regret to retreat from our bedrooms as if they no longer are a part of us. Our new scars have grown numb enough we can ignore them. Our uppermost floor, that dusty realm where spiders spin, has not fallen prey to this ridiculousness. We would hide there but for our young friend, for whom we feel a responsibility of sorts. He cannot merely

skirt our second floor and its admixture of gaudy pinks and the trivia released from the fat male. Those zones that this errant state of mind has forbidden us entry could catch him; drag him down into their chaos.

Our other dreams, those tame and blurry hybrids we have struggled to hide from our guests still congregate fearfully in the cellar. We present a nexus of ourself there, in the inky darkness and the perfume of wine. Our dreams sigh in comfort when they sense our presence. With gentle prodding and the simplest tricks, we nudge these apparitions into corners and into cracks in the walls. Hush, we tell them, as we urge their misshapen bodies into hiding, we have a guest coming to visit and we don't want to scare him do we?

Pliant in their fear of the violation which chased them here, they give us hardly any trouble. By the time our friend has stumbled down one of our last, unmolested passageways and drawn near to the cellar door, our dreams have been safely stored away.

He reaches for the doorknob, trembling yet trusting the intuitions we have fostered in his poor little mind, he is actually opening the door when the female leader lurches down the hallway and is at his back. It's our fault, really, we see as she lifts a broken bottle in one bloody paw. We have been so intent on prettying this place for him, so worried about the unruly mob down in the shadows, we have completely ignored the real danger.

She bleeds the same mucus from every spot of skin but bears no rictus of exaggerated joy. Her face has instead drawn forward, stretching out into a muzzle like that of some more feral beast. Lips drawn so thin now that they present a mere line, her face terminates in something of a beak. The details distract us: we wonder at the chipped white talons that have sprung from her paws. We wonder so foolishly at this twisted form our own dreaming has birthed that we make no attempt at stopping her from stabbing our friend in the back with

her jagged bottle.

He shudders, flings back a paw in a futile attempt at dislodging this hurt and from his lips comes an awful sound. This puling cry, more pitiful than a whimper, far worse than the shrieks that have echoed through our hallways tonight, wakes us from the comforting thought that this is only a fantasy. We are flooded with rage, with shame at our damnable evasions of responsibility. We fling open the door he leans against and he topples down stone steps. That blasphemy which wears animals like masks moves to follow its prey into his last refuge. With no conscious prompting of ours, though, one of our dreams (a sweat slicked, ragged shred of a woman) slams the door shut and presses her flimsy body against it. In seconds others crawl from their nooks, all worries of being seen now displaced by this violence, and add their weight to hers.

In the hall outside, the beaked female throws herself at the door with abandon. Bones snap with the impact, but the thing inhabiting her feels no pain. It keeps up with this assault until the body is obviously too damaged for more and then begins squawking loudly. We have too much to consider on the other side of the door but we do pick out a line intended for us.

It says, "Cannot hide forever old fustpot." It leans on our old wallpaper and staggers down the hallway. It leans against the wall for it has somehow bent one of the female's legs in half. "Not yours to hide in trash-shack. Not any more. Only wish you could stay to see the blossoming." We watch it lurch around the corner and shudder at the glistening smear of fluid with which it stains the wall. Soon enough the twisting wave of changes which erupted from the body in the kitchen rushes down the hallway. Before the cellar swallows us, we see that the new wallpaper (a vile green entwined with an orange surely bred in the Outer Void) incorporates this smear, forever burning that monster's retreat into a wall forever severed from us.

THE TRICKLE THAT leaks from our friend is so small at first, as the bottle is wedged into his back, sealing the wound. No carpeting, no tiny tables or nasty wall-coverings bleed from him. Instead, out seeps a thick black fluid, a shimmering sludge that moves about the cellar intentionally yet without invasive design. This sad beast cannot see in the darkness, fortunately. From every spot in the darkness, our dreams creep out to study him. Even if we felt the need to further shield him from them, these mumbling shards of our past would shrug off our resistance. Exhaustion steals over us and traps us in its gentle spell. For every room we have lost we have been drained of will; every study and closet and hall ripped from our body has taken with it strength.

We see the beaked creature crawling into our attic, the only other place in our body still accessible to our sight. There is nothing we can do to prevent it from polluting the dusty wooden floorboards with its slime. The atrocious thing has dragged this poor puppet to a beam in the center of the high-steeped room. There, it props itself against the wood and whistles shrilly to itself.

It bobs its head about, searching for a face, a presence, until it realizes we are already there. The beak opens widely and after a riot of noise come the words. The body it uses is far too damaged by now to relay much sense (as it speaks, the paws involuntarily spasm and fling about) and whatever this blight is which has stolen our body, it has little in the way of understanding. Still, we draw shades of sense from its cackling. It never intends to release us from the darkness into which we have been hounded, this much is certain. "Chase you into there even," it chatters at a line of spiders that have heroically attacked it only to be crushed under its talons.

Gracelessly, the creature pulls a serrated blade from its coat pocket. After fumbling at it in a way apparently amusing to the invader, it finally gets firmly enough hold of the knife to bring it to its abdomen.

“The beginning. Welcome and goodbye,” it says to us and pushes the blade in as deep as it will go.

Sickened, angry, sorry, we do not stay to watch the poor female cut herself open, nor do we care to see what spills from her insides. Moments later and the tearing sensations of losing part of ourself go numb and we are in the cellar, our cellar, our only home.

IT HAPPENS QUICKLY, our friend’s passing. He groans at the figures that surround him, hopefully mistaking them for loved ones, hopefully not noticing the missing limbs, the faded features, the amalgamations bred of fancy and forgetfulness. He beckons at the bottle still cruelly embedded in his back and before we can restrain it, the same dream that closed the door behind him reaches out and removes the weapon. Suddenly, the cellar is awash in a thicker darkness as the male opens into a stream. Our bric-a-brac, our dreams, even, somehow, ourself, are submerged, tossed and turned, caught in this flood of sorrow and panic. Dimly we sense a mind, a friendly presence threaded throughout this whirlpool into which we sink. Beyond the frightening clamoring of our phantasms, we hear our friend’s mind. He calls to us now in a voice perfectly intelligible, our self and his self brought to the same fundamental existence, our voices of a kind. Even in our fear and woe, we rejoice in the contact.

THE FLUID RECEDES slowly. When it is gone, much is the same: cracked brick and stone steps, wooden stacks of wine crates, stray bits of broken glass. Somehow, neither the layers of dust nor the cobwebs that adorn support beams have been disturbed. Somehow the footsteps where someone stumbled down the stairs and fell hard to the floor remain.

There are, however, new presences. Large crates sit wedged in the corners. Broken toys litter a spot near the steps. Barrels

and boxes and bags are crammed against one another all around the center of the cellar. Everything here bears the mark of advanced age, as if they did not drop into place mere hours ago but have instead been waiting for years.

As the sun shows its cowardly face, the rats that survived the massacre of a few days previous return to the cellar. At first wary of these new intruders, the rodents are soon rubbing against the antiques, squeaking an odd pleasure at the crates and whatever hides within. They are pleased by the whispers that drift from every corner, by the sighs and murmurs that come from within locked wooden boxes, from the shrouded mirror, from the rusted piano in the corner. Soon a chorus of voices have arisen, conferring with itself, measuring itself, content that it still is, though inward turned now, largely blind to the twisted world above it.

The rats recognize, if not the multitude of voices, at least a certain underlying tone, a humming unity that stirs in their blessed, furry heart’s sensations of awe, respect, of love. The voices issue a sacred mission for these tiny ones, a message for the Others, a warning: Beware the new voice we give. Beware our marvelous new facade. A poison breeds here which would spread its rot. Beware.

Already we hear stirring above, the voices of new dwellers. How long can they abide amongst the fantasies which have usurped us? How long will that obscenity withhold its hunger? How long until they too are brought low by the thing from behind the pale blue door? ©

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