



HARROW

CULLEN BUNN • TYLER CROOK

COUNTY

#1

“A rare thing—both
wonderfully charming and
genuinely disturbing.”
—Mike Mignola



HAINTS

**My uncle Hugh McKay warned me to be wary
of the ghosts and ghouls lurking in lonely,
forgotten, and unwelcoming places.**

“Haints,” he called them.

**They skulked in hollows and abandoned
tobacco barns and old factories where men had
broke their backs to make a dime.**

**They were like the fingers of death,
finding purchase in our world.**

**And according to Hugh McKay,
“Them things were everywhere.”**

-CULLEN BUNN





THE FOLK OF HARROW COUNTY
PUT THE WITCH TO DEATH...

...BUT THE WITCH
DID NOT DIE EASILY.



HESTER BECK HAD BEEN
SHOT, STABBED, BEATEN...

...AND FINALLY
HANGED BY
THE NECK.



SHE HAD BEEN ONE OF THEM,
THOUGH--A NEIGHBOR AND...
AT TIMES ... A FRIEND...

...AND THEM THAT KILLED HER
WOULD'VE GIVEN HER A PROPER
BURIAL AND LAST RITES...



...BUT THE RAIN WASHED THE
PAGES OF THE BIBLE CLEAN.



IN LIFE, HESTER HAD
BEEN A HEALING WOMAN.



SHE CURED FRAILTIES AND
AILMENTS WITH WHISPERED
INCANTATIONS...

... CHASING THEM AWAY
AS EASILY AS SHOOTING
STRAY TOMCATS.

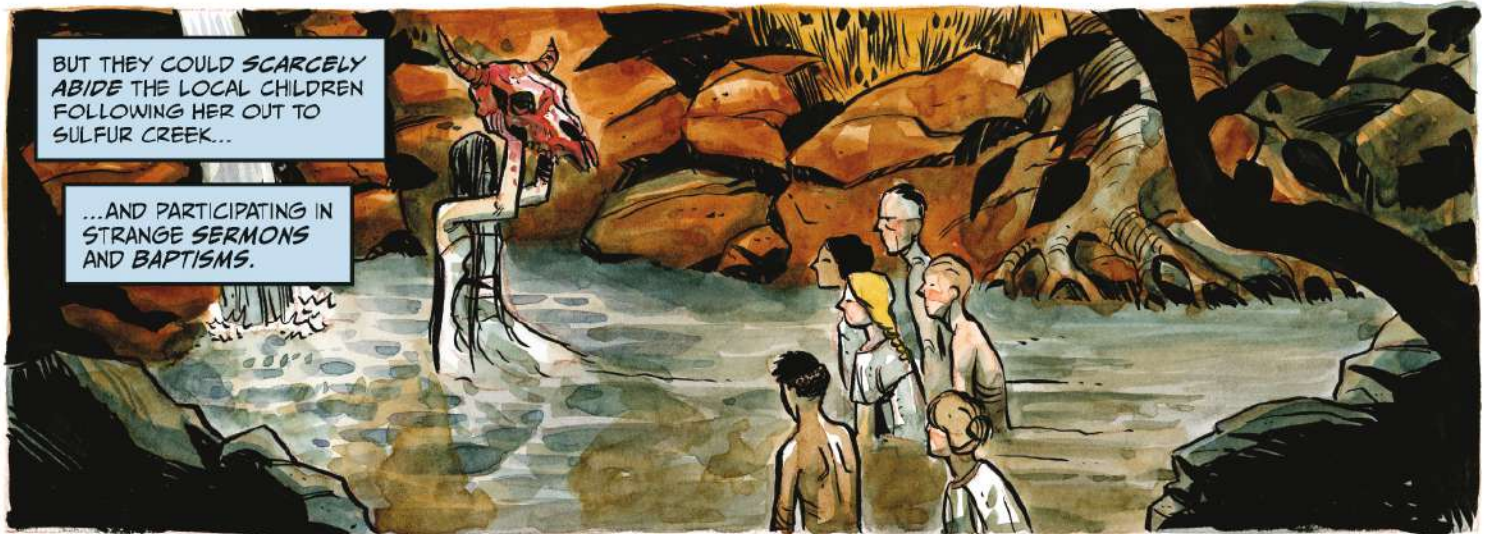
FOR A TIME, FOLK TURNED A BLIND EYE WHEN LIVESTOCK STARTED DYING IN HESTER'S PRESENCE.

"THERE MUST BE A TRADE," THEY MIGHT SAY. "WHAT IS TAKEN MUST BE GIVEN."



BUT THEY COULD SCARCELY ABIDE THE LOCAL CHILDREN FOLLOWING HER OUT TO SULFUR CREEK...

...AND PARTICIPATING IN STRANGE SERMONS AND BAPTISMS.



NOR COULD THEY STOMACH RUMORS OF BLASPHEMOUS CONGRESS WITH HEINOUS THINGS OUT IN THE WOODS.

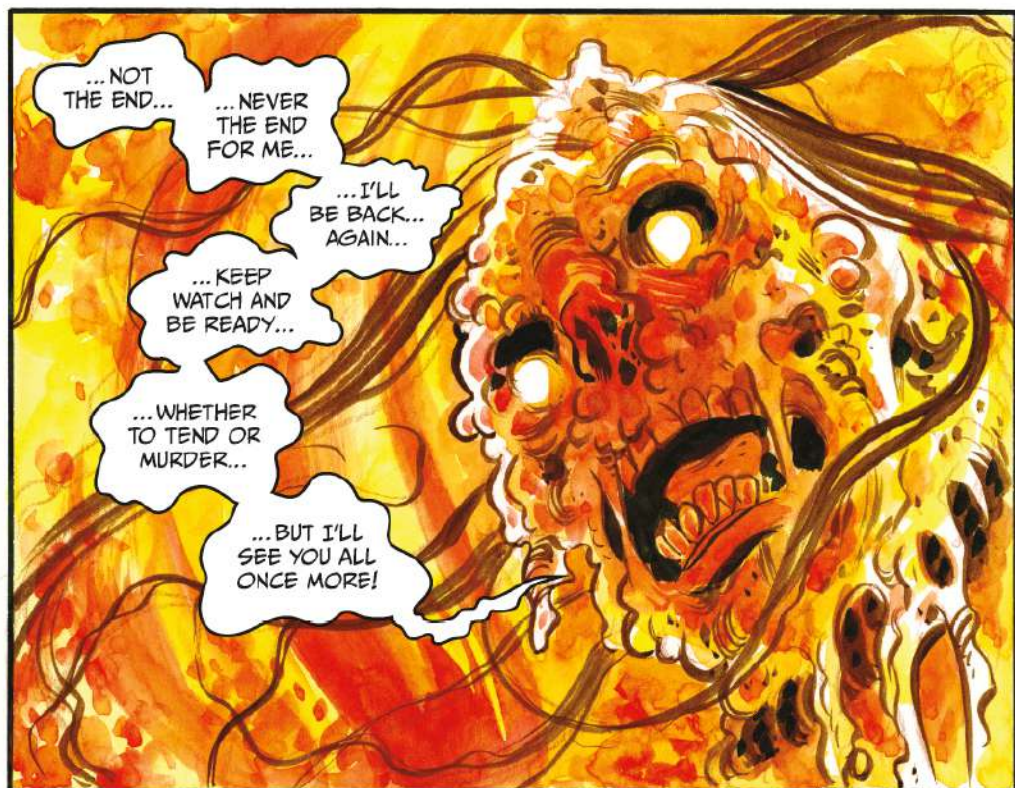
THEY NO LONGER SAT IDLY BY...



...WHEN THEY DISCOVERED HOW SHE FED HER VILE COMPANIONS...

...AND HOW SHE STRENGTHENED HER OWN SUPERNATURAL GIFTS.





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HER EARLIEST MEMORIES WERE OF
THE TASTE OF FRESHLY TURNED EARTH
AND THE BLEATING OF GOATS.





SOMETIMES... WHEN EMMY WOKE FROM A BAD DREAM...

... A DREAM OF THE TREE AND THE AWFUL THINGS HIDDEN BENEATH ITS ROOTS...

... SHE COULD ALMOST FEEL THE GRIT OF DIRT ON HER TONGUE.



SHE COULD ALMOST HEAR THE BESTIAL SCREAMING ECHO IN HER EARS.



IT WAS THE ECHO OF NIGHTMARES.

OF HAINTS.



SHE COULD NOT SEE THEM, BUT SHE KNEW THEY WERE THERE.

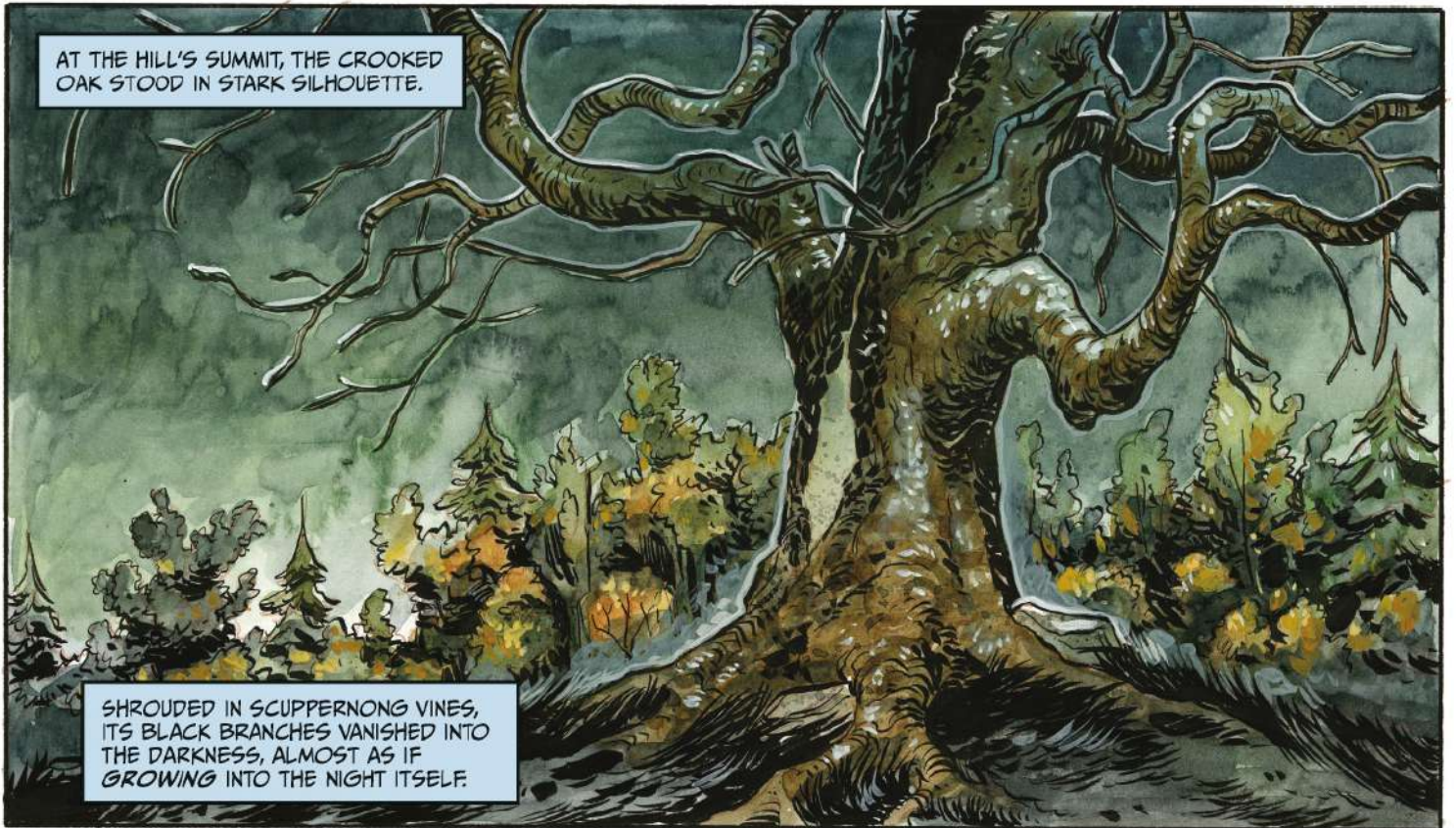
WRAPPED IN SHADOW, THEY CROWDED CLOSE TO THE BED, WATCHING HER.



COUNTLESS HAINTS.



AND THE TREE WATCHED
OVER THEM ALL.



AT THE HILL'S SUMMIT, THE CROOKED
OAK STOOD IN STARK SILHOUETTE.

SHROUDED IN SCUPPERNONG VINES,
ITS BLACK BRANCHES VANISHED INTO
THE DARKNESS, ALMOST AS IF
GROWING INTO THE NIGHT ITSELF.



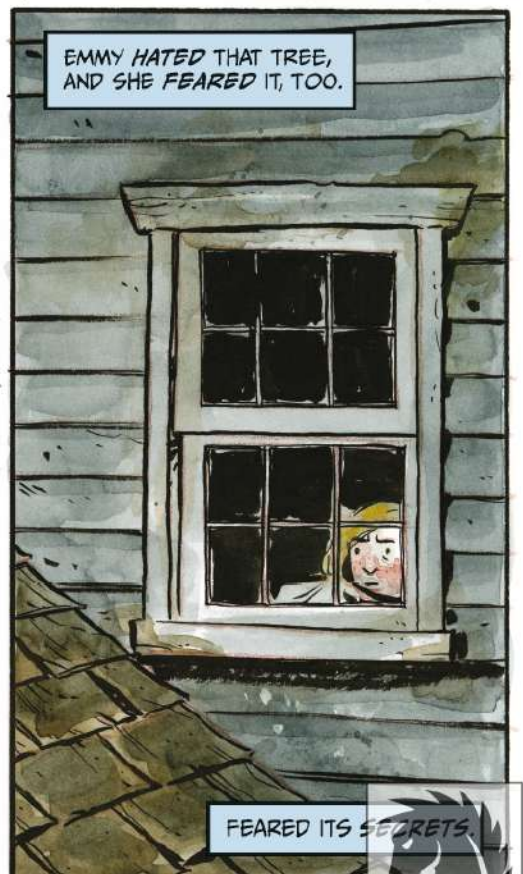
YEARS AGO, OR SO EMMY HAD
BEEN TOLD, THE OAK HAD BEEN
STRUCK BY LIGHTNING.

THE TREE HAD NOT
GROWN SINCE, AND
A ROTTING HOLLOW
NOW YAWNED IN
THE TRUNK.



THE CAVITY HAD BEEN
FILLED TO KEEP THE
WOUND FROM SPREADING.

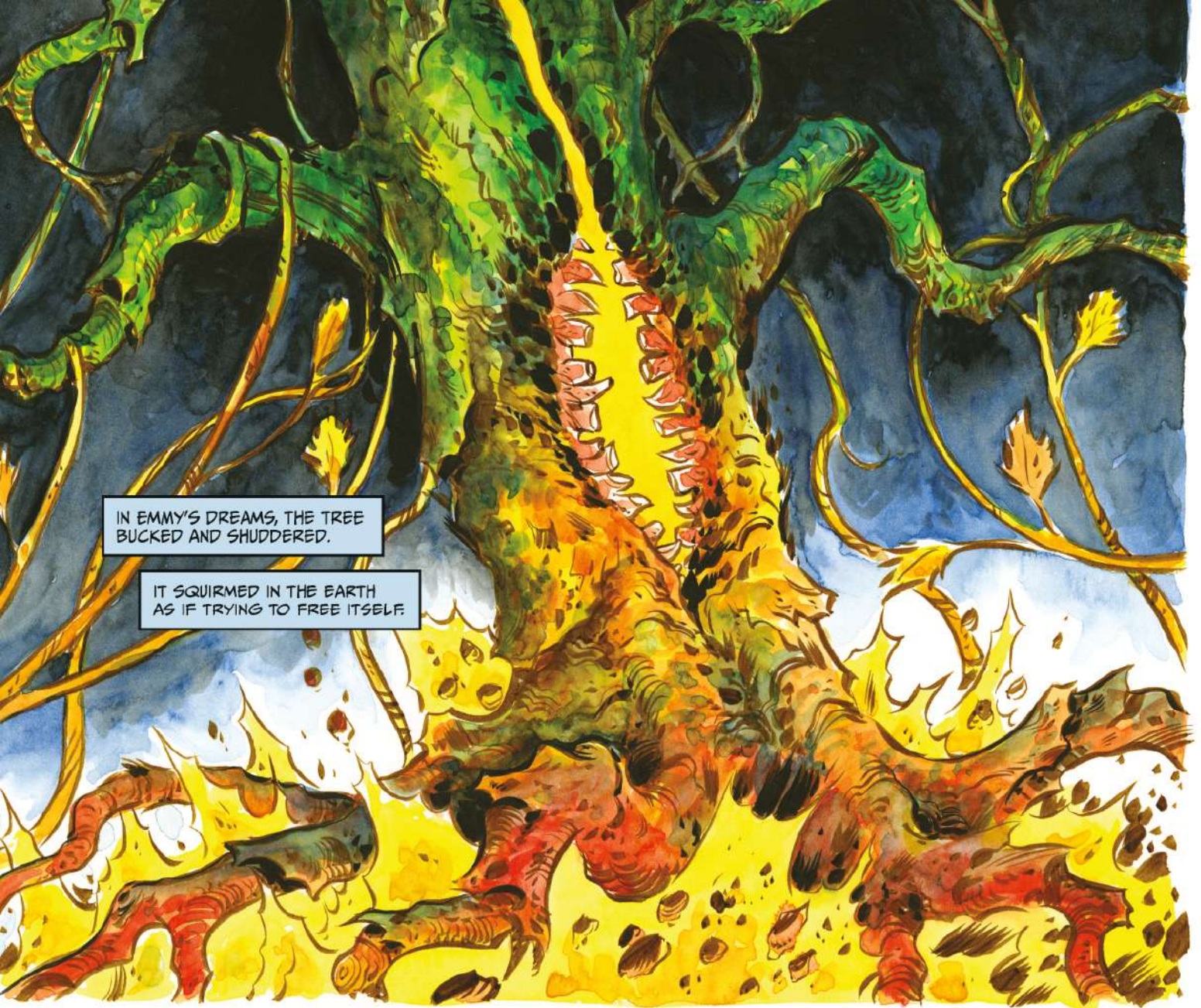
BUT THE DECAYING WOOD
PULLED AWAY FROM THE
CONCRETE LIKE GUMS
RECEDING FROM OLD,
BLUNTED TEETH.



EMMY HATED THAT TREE,
AND SHE FEARED IT, TOO.

FEARED ITS SECRETS





IN EMMY'S DREAMS, THE TREE
BUCKED AND SHUDDERED.

IT SQUIRMED IN THE EARTH
AS IF TRYING TO FREE ITSELF.



THE DRAPING GRAPEVINES
RUSTLED WITH A SOUND LIKE
HISSING WHISPERS.



AND THE GRIT-ENCRUSTED LIPS
OF THE HOLLOW TWITCHED
OPEN AND CLOSED LIKE A
HUNGRY MOUTH.



LIES!

LIES!





WHAT DO YOU KNOW, YOU OLD MONSTER?



WHAT DO YOU KNOW?



JUST A TREE.

NOTHING MORE.



BUT EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS TIRED, EMMY DREADED CLOSING HER EYES ONCE AGAIN.

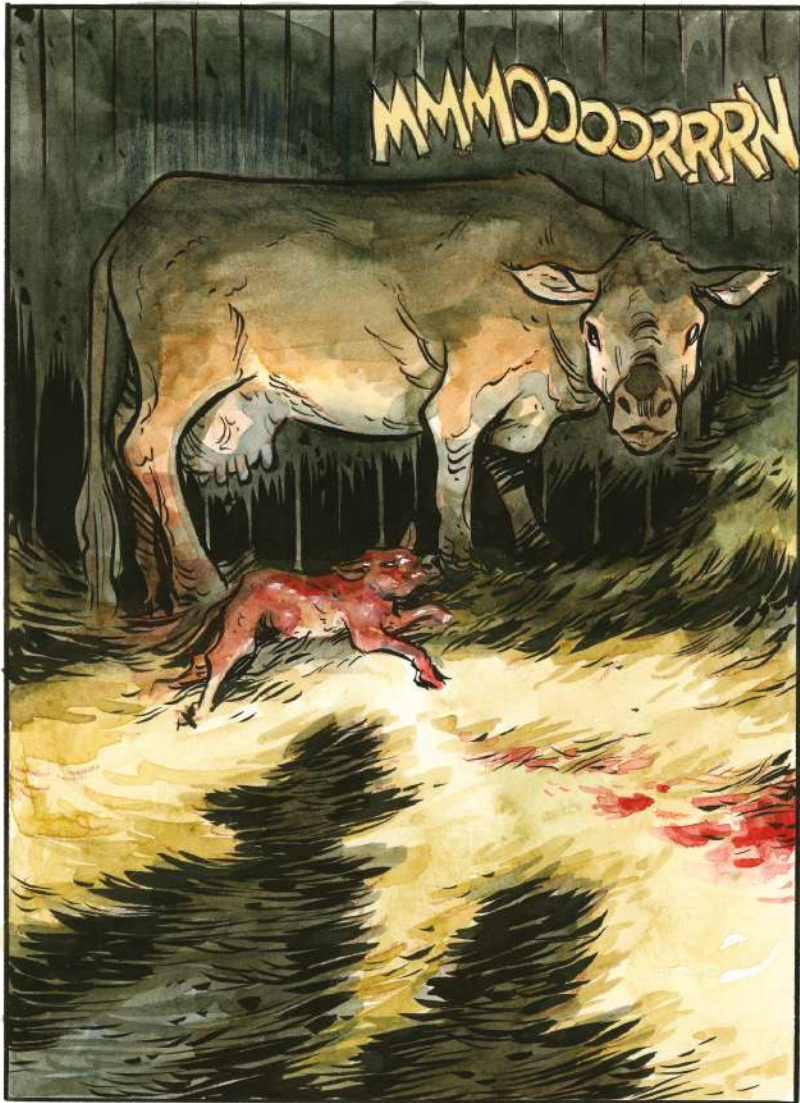
SHE COULD NOT SHAKE THE WORD THE TREE HAD SPOKEN.



"LIES," THE TREE HAD SAID.







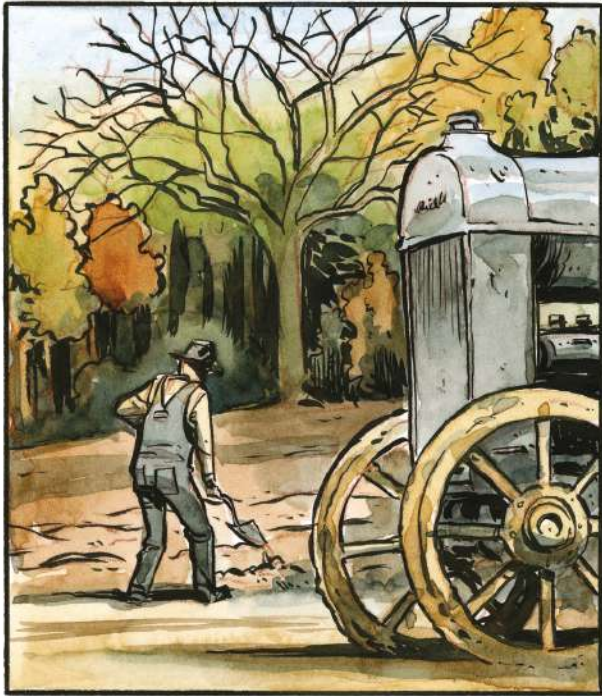








"ISN'T THAT SOMETHING?"



HOW MANY IS THAT NOW?

WHY'RE THEY BEING BORN LIKE THAT, PA?

BETWEEN THE CHICKENS AND THE COWS... NEAR ABOUT A DOZEN.

BURIED AND GONE NOW.



YOU OUGHT NOT WORRY ABOUT SUCH THINGS.



IT DON'T MEAN ANYTHING.







HIS WAGON WAS ALWAYS LOADED WITH CANNED FOOD AND DRY GOODS.

PA DIDN'T LIKE THE MAN FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER.

BUT EMMY ALWAYS WELCOMED THE COMPANY.



RIAH!
BERNICE!



HOW YOU DOING, EMMY GIRL?

FINE. JUST FINE.

BRING ANYTHING GOOD THIS TIME?



SEE FOR YOURSELF.

GOT SOME MORE BOOKS YOU MIGHT LIKE TO READ.

GO ON OVER AND BERNICE'LL SHOW YOU.





AIN'T YOU GOT A BIRTHDAY COMING UP?

THAT'S RIGHT.

I'LL BE EIGHTEEN COME DAY AFTER TOMORROW.



YOU'RE DARN NEAR A WOMAN GROWN. WHAT'RE YOU GONNA DO WITH YOURSELF?

I SUPPOSE I'LL DO THE SAME THING I ALWAYS HAVE.

EIGHTEEN'S NO DIFFERENT THAN SEVENTEEN, FAR AS I'M CONCERNED.



YOU AIN'T SPENDING YOUR WHOLE LIFE ON THIS HERE PIECE OF LAND, ARE YOU?

DON'T YOU WANT TO SEE MORE OF THE WORLD?

DON'T YOU WANT TO MEET A FELLA?



HUSH, YOU.

YOU DON'T WANT MY FA TO HEAR YOU SAY THAT. HE'LL HAVE SOME SORT OF AN ATTACK OR THE LIKE.



BESIDES, PA NEEDS ME HERE.

WHO ELSE IS GONNA HELP HIM MANAGE THE FARM?

HE WOULDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITHOUT ME.



YOU WANT TO SEE THE NEW CALF?

SURE.



LOOK AT ALL THEM FRESH GRAVES!

YOU HAD A SPOT OF MISFORTUNE, ISAAC?

NOTHING I CAN'T HANDLE.

JUST A FEVER RUNNING THROUGH THE LIVESTOCK.

AND NOTHING YOU NEED TO WORRY YOURSELF WITH.



YOU SURE ABOUT THAT?

EMMY'S ALMOST OF AGE.



IF THERE WERE SIGNS, I'D SEE THEM.

NO CURDLED MILK... NO STRAY DOGS SNIFFING ABOUT... NO BRIMSTONE STINK.

AIN'T HEARD HER COMPLAIN ABOUT DREAMS OR THE LIKE.



YOU DON'T NEED TO CONVINCE ME.

YOU KNOW THE GIRL BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE.

AND SHE SEEMS NORMAL ENOUGH, DOESN'T SHE?



WEREN'T YOU LISTENING? SHE IS NORMAL.

AFTER WHAT WE DONE ALL THEM YEARS AGO...

...SHE AIN'T COMING BACK.



LIKE I SAID, I'M INCLINED TO BELIEVE YOU.

I LIKE HER, TOO. ALWAYS HAVE.

I HOPE YOU'RE RIGHT.

BECAUSE... IF N YOU'RE WRONG...

...IF N YOU MISSED SOMETHING...



"... THAT GIRL WILL HAVE HER VENGEANCE... AGAINST EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US."



PA?

YOU KNOW I'VE GOT A BIRTHDAY IN A FEW DAYS, DON'T YOU?

CAN'T SAY AS I'D FORGET.



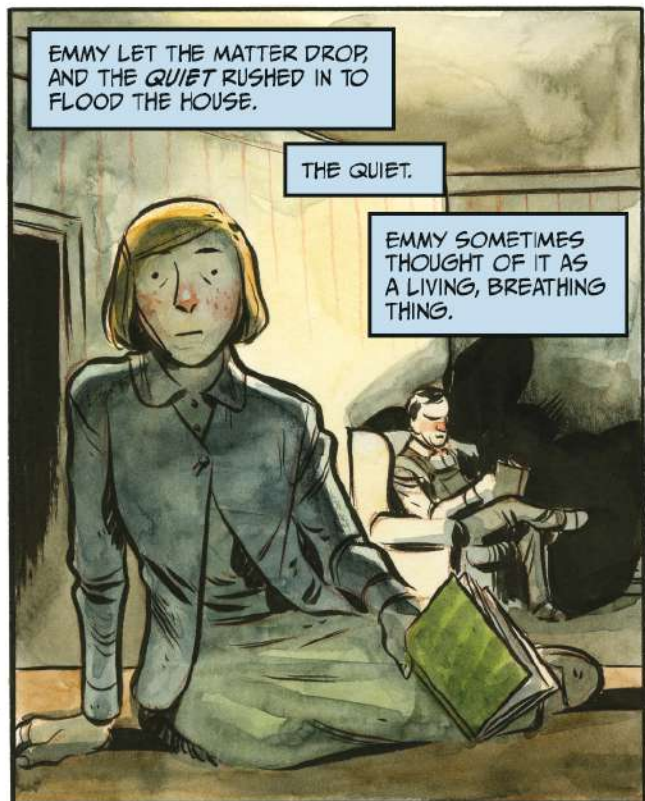
BERNICE SAYS HOW I OUGHT TO GET OUT AND SEE THE WORLD. SAID I OUGHT TO TRY TO MEET A BOY.

DON'T MUCH LIKE THE THOUGHT OF YOU RUNNING OFF WITH SOME NO-COUNT FARMER FROM TOWN.



ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING YOU GOT A NO-COUNT FARMER DADDY WHO NEEDS YOU RIGHT HERE.

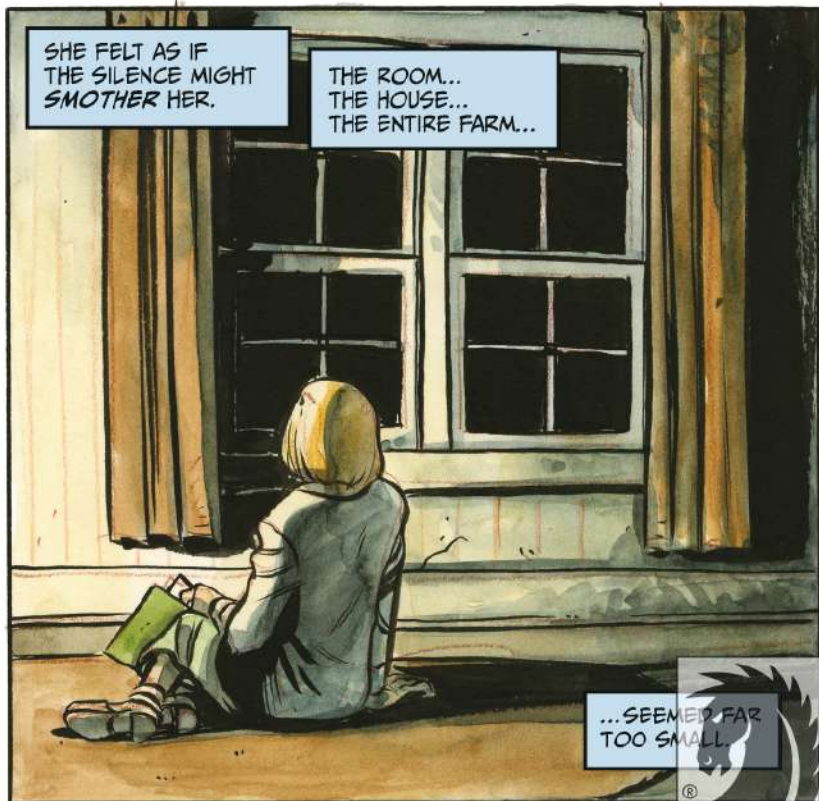
YOU IN SUCH A HURRY TO GROW UP AND LEAVE ME ALL ALONE?



EMMY LET THE MATTER DROP, AND THE QUIET RUSHED IN TO FLOOD THE HOUSE.

THE QUIET.

EMMY SOMETIMES THOUGHT OF IT AS A LIVING, BREATHING THING.



SHE FELT AS IF THE SILENCE MIGHT SMOTHER HER.

THE ROOM... THE HOUSE... THE ENTIRE FARM...

...SEEMED FAR TOO SMALL



THE WOODS, ON THE OTHER HAND,
STRETCHED AWAY FROM THE FARM...

...AND INTO FOREVER.



SOME OF THE TREES
WERE TALLER EVEN
THAN THE BLIGHTED
OAK UPON THE HILL.

EMMY WONDERED IF THE
LIGHTNING-SCARRED TREE
HAD ONCE BEEN PART OF
THE FOREST.



HAD IT BEEN SEPARATED
FROM ITS ILK WHEN THE
FARM WAS RAISED?

IF THE OAK HAD NOT BEEN
STRUCK BY LIGHTNING, WOULD
IT HAVE GROWN AS PROUDLY
AS THE REST OF THE TREES
IN THE FOREST?



HAD THE OAK BEEN
CAST OUT FROM
THEIR RANKS?

THE TREES HERE WERE HEALTHY
AND TALL, NOT TWISTED AND
MEAN-SPIRITED AND CRUEL.



THEY NEEDED NOT TO
WHISPER SECRETS.

THE FOREST WAS SILENT
SAVE FOR THE RUSH OF
BREEZE THROUGH THE
LEAVES... AND THE
GURLING OF THE CREEK.



FOR AS LONG AS EMMY COULD REMEMBER, PA HAD PROMISED HE WAS GOING TO REPAIR THE OLD, ROTTING BRIDGE.

"SOMEONE'S GONNA FALL STRAIGHT THROUGH," HE'D SAY, "I DON'T TAKE HAMMER AND NAIL TO THEM TIMBERS."



THE WATER WAS SO CLEAR, SHE COULD SEE A FEW SKINNY FISH DARTING THROUGH.



AND DRAGONFLIES DANCED OVER THE CREEK'S SURFACE.

SNAKE DOCTORS, PA CALLED THEM.



WHENEVER YOU SAW ONE, YOU COULD BE SURE A COPPERHEAD OR WATER MOCCASIN LURKED NEARBY.



HEY, DOWN THERE!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?











THE SKIN.
ONLY
THE SKIN.



HHHHHHH...



THE BOY'S TORN LIPS
TWITCHED AND THE
EMPTY MOUTH TRIED
TO FORM WORDS.

HHHHHHHHHHH...

AND HIS BREATH
REEKED LIKE A
SLAUGHTERHOUSE.



ANOTHER GHOST...
ANOTHER HAIINT...

... WHISPERING ITS
SECRETS...
TRYING TO TELL
EMMY SOMETHING...

... TRYING TO WARN HER
OF WHAT WAS TO COME...

... OF THE POWER
WITHIN HER BLOOD...

... AND THE
DARKNESS
CAME WITH IT.



TALES OF HARROW COUNTY

BAPTISM

WRITER: CULLEN BUNN ARTIST: OWEN GIENTI

THERE'S A REASON FOLKS DON'T DO BAPTISMS IN KETTLE CREEK...

...OR BAPTISMS OF ANY SORT... ANYMORE.

YOU COULD SEE IT IN CHARLIE BEUMONT'S EYES.

IN YOUR OBEDIENCE TO THE LORD... AND UPON YOUR PROFESSION OF FAITH...

...I BAPTIZE YOU, MY BROTHER.

HE WAS SCARED.



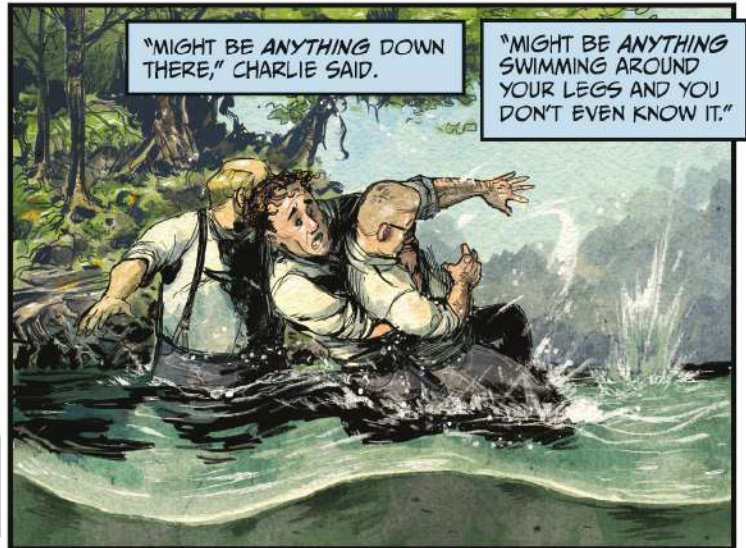
CHARLIE DIDN'T LIKE THE WATER...

...WOULDN'T EVEN GO SWIMMING WITH HIS FRIENDS ON HOT SUMMER DAYS.

HE COULD SWIM JUST FINE.

L-LORD!

BUT HE SAID HE DIDN'T LIKE IT WHEN HE COULDN'T SEE HIS FEET BELOW THE SURFACE.



"MIGHT BE ANYTHING DOWN THERE," CHARLIE SAID.

"MIGHT BE ANYTHING SWIMMING AROUND YOUR LEGS AND YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW IT."

SOME FOLKS SAID THAT THE CURRENT SWEEPED THE BOY AWAY.

HE'S... HE'S...

...GONE!

BUT ONLY CHARLIE KNEW FOR SURE.



LET'S TALK ABOUT THE TREE. —CULLEN BUNN

#HARROWCOUNTY



Let's talk about the tree.

The blighted oak overlooking Emmy's house is a big, nasty beast of a tree—a haint in its own right—and it's a monstrosity that has haunted my dreams for years.

Trees feature in many of my stories. In *The Sixth Gun*, a grim hanging tree (which Tyler Crook his own self drew with reckless abandon) moved from place to place in the dead of night, the ghosts that dangled from its branches offering dreadful prophecies. In my short story "Beneath Black Boughs My Darlings Slumber," a desperate man used terrible magic to turn his wife and child into twisted trees. In another short story, "Gallows," children build a swing on the branches of a haunted tree, and when they swing too high, they vanish altogether.

So, yeah, I've written a lot about creepy old trees.

And why not?

Last summer, I looked out at the tangled woods behind my house and noticed that one of the tallest trees was completely void of foliage. From top to bottom, it was dead, jutting up from the ground like a skeletal hand. What made it all the more troubling was I was certain I had just looked at that same tree only a few days before and it had been green and full of lush life. It was as if the tree had died virtually overnight.

Realizing the tree, when it fell, could easily strike my house, I called someone to help cut it down. The guy showed up, took one look at the decaying behemoth, and let out a worried sigh.

"That's one mean tree," he said, "and sooner or later, it's going to hurt someone—bad."

Maybe I've always felt that way to some degree. Like those ancient trees—the ones that have seen a lot of history—deserve respect... and if they don't get it, they might turn on you. And that's the kind of thinking that spawns all sorts of monsters for me. Gallows trees and oracle trees and hideous creatures that only look like trees when they're dormant. Those primordial beasts have a permanent spot on the "things that creep Cullen out" list.

But the blighted oak—with its concrete-filled maw and ghastly utterances—was the first.

I dreamed that tree up a long time ago—when I was still a kid, really—and it was inspired by a very real tree in the woods surrounding my childhood home near Dudley, North Carolina.

"The Big Tree" is what kids called it—because, well, it was big. In a forest full of skinny pines and tangled thorns, the Big Tree rose like a silent sentinel. It was obviously much older than the surrounding woods. It might have been a hundred years old. Or two hundred. Or a thousand, for all we knew.

But the strangest feature of this tree was the blade.



About twelve feet off the ground, embedded in the meat of the tree between two massive branches, was a large, rusty plow blade—the kind horses used to drag through the dirt come field-tilling time. It was big and heavy and dotted with water stains—and it was sunk deep into the tree. The origins of that blade sparked a lot of discussion. Had the blade been left in the dirt and the tree grown up around it, lifting it over time to its lofty position? Had a tornado grabbed the plow blade up from some nearby



farm and hurled it into the tree trunk? However the blade ended up there, it looked as if the bark of the tree had sealed around it, holding it tight.

The Big Tree captured our imagination, and we all set about adding to its legend. One of my pals swore he once walked past the tree at dusk and was startled to hear ghastly whispering coming from the underbrush. Another said he saw a ghostly green light creeping through the woods near the tree (and at one time or another, we all claimed to have “seen” this glow). On another occasion, I heard a friend of mine screaming from deep in the forest. I ran through the thorns and thickets to find him hanging upside down from a thick vine that dangled from the Big Tree’s branches. I have no clue how he managed to get up there all by himself,

but he said some unseen force had hurled him through the air.

Some years later, for some reason, my dad went out into the woods, climbed the tree, and pried the heavy plow blade free. I don’t remember why, but the Big Tree lost some of its magic that day.

I’m sure the Big Tree fell long ago. Houses now occupy the land where those woods once ran wild. That old rusty plow blade was most likely sold off at one auction or another. I like to think, though, that the blade might have been discarded in some untamed and still-wild spot of land. And maybe another tree grew up beneath, maybe even overnight, to stand peerless in a forest where only haints dare to tread.



HAVE A WEIRD TALE OF YOUR OWN TO SHARE?

WRITE TO HARROWCOUNTY@DARKHORSE.COM.



