

T H E H O U S E
O F D U S T

N O A H B R O Y L E S

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Published by Inkshares, Inc., San Francisco, California
www.inkshares.com

Edited by Adam Gomolin, Barnaby Conrad, & Pamela McElroy
Cover design by Tim Barber
Interior design by Kevin G. Summers

ISBN: 9781947848870
e-ISBN: 9781947848887
LCCN: 2019930695

First edition

Printed in the United States of America

To my mom and dad.
Thank you for the typewriter.

There is the house whose people sit in darkness;
dust is their food. . . they are clothed like birds
with wings for covering, they see no light. . .
I entered the house of dust and saw the kings of the earth,
their crowns put away forever; rulers and princes,
all those who once. . . ruled the world in the days of old.

—The *Epic of Gilgamesh*

EDITOR'S NOTE

On June 4, 2018, a rental car registered to Bradley Ellison—*Southern Gothic's* crime writer—was found in a McDonald's parking lot in Lexington, Tennessee. The driver's-side window was shattered, and the writer was inside, dead from a gunshot wound.

During the month prior to this tragedy, Mr. Ellison had been working with great enthusiasm on a project centered around a house in rural Tennessee. After we had expressed concern about the quality of his latest publications in this magazine, he assured us that this project would restore our faith in him.

Mr. Ellison certainly tells a fantastic tale in this—his last—article. But while *Southern Gothic* has been able to verify the locations, the events themselves are unverifiable. The locals Mr. Ellison interacted with proved reclusive, even hostile, when approached later by some of our colleagues. We trust, however, that when judging this piece, our readers will remember the caliber of Mr. Ellison's reporting on the Serene Flats murders.

Mr. Ellison expresses opinions in this article about the staff of this magazine, specifically myself, that may be shocking to our readers. We have decided not to edit these out for the sake of honesty and integrity. Mr. Ellison was entitled to his opinions, and we are entitled to ours—that his attacks are unfair and incorrect.

After carefully considering all of these factors, we have decided to publish the entire article, raw and unedited, as it was sent to us on that midsummer night last year, mere minutes before its author's death. Mr. Ellison did not consider it finished, and neither do we. We consider it a beginning, though to what future we cannot yet know. Awareness, perhaps, will make these types of tragedies less common. *Southern Gothic* has always embraced controversy, and with the publication of this piece we do so with a clear head. Even so, reader discretion is advised.

—Heather Graff, *Editor in Chief*

This issue of *Southern Gothic*
is dedicated to the memory of

Bradley Oswald Ellison
June 7, 1987–June 3, 2018

W H I S P E R
F R O M T H E
D U S T



I got off the interstate to commit suicide.

I was supposed to interview a police chief in Jackson about a carjacking cold case, but my tire blew out with thirty miles to go. The delay killed the appointment, and the trouble I had swapping tires revealed my own inadequacy even more. The car rode unlevel on the spare, droning the prospect of another failed investigation into my bones. Heat pressed through the sunroof, pounding memories of my fiancée's screaming face through my sweaty scalp. Both those pillars of my life—collapsing. When I saw the next off-ramp, I put on my signal.

It was one of those dead, pointless exits in rural Tennessee that serves perhaps a dozen people a day. Left was the interstate underpass. Right was blank road. I wanted a quiet place to do it. I went right, out into the wilderness, leaving the world and all its weight behind.

But the weight followed me.

It was the end of April, but outside the grimy glass, the afternoon trees wore the tired green of late summer. I searched for a shady gravel patch along the shoulder. The broken driver's-side window control clicked beneath my forefinger as the rising pressure crushed open a primal place in my brain filled with flames and billowing smoke and the searing smell of raw oil. My eyes watered. I tried to still my finger but couldn't.

The clicking only stopped when I saw the sign. It leaned drunkenly among thick honeysuckle at the far edge of the highway. My vision cleared. Buried beneath many spray-painted desecration attempts lay the official black lettering:

THREE SUMMERS—TWO MILES

Just beyond the sign, a leafy mouth opened in the wall of the woods, the shrouded access point to the forgotten town. It would do. I turned across the highway and stopped my car amid the brackish twilight.

An RIA .38 Special rode in the glove box. I took it out and braced it against my temple. The movements of my jaw, clenching and unclenching, translated along its length into my hand. I could already smell the sulfur, already feel the fiery track of the bullet through my brain. The window would shatter. The flies would come through the breach and settle on my body. Eventually, someone would happen down this road and find my car. Word would get out, swirl across local networks, then end up in Atlanta on the desk of my editor, Heather. My own death would be the last violent, meaningless story I provided her. I might just as well have stepped out in traffic while changing the car tire back on the interstate.

No, I did not want a violent death.

I replaced the gun and picked up an orange canister from the passenger-side floorboard. Ten milligrams would buoy me up. Lift the weight. Bring me back to the surface. But there was fire on the surface. The endless fight to stay afloat. The story I could never tell.

I gripped the canister. It would take about a dozen pills to get sleepy, a dozen more to soar from my body for good. But I couldn't swallow one pill dry, let alone twenty-four.

"Some water," I said aloud. "I need a drink of water."

—"The House of Dust"
Southern Gothic

BRAD STARTED THE car and stepped on the gas.

A winding kaleidoscope of fragmented sunlight and pavement sucked him into the breathless forest. The car lurched through potholes and tilted as the road slithered carelessly along a hillside. It felt like the roller coaster at the Enchanted Forest, back when he was a kid. *What if we die?* his dad had said. *Know what you'll say when you die, Brad? I know what I'll say: Amen.*

The leaves thickened overhead, and the branches hunched down and locked together, vines twisting around to secure them in place. The headlights blinked on automatically, and the dash display brightened. He was going almost fifty. But instead of the hum of tires, silence rose around his legs, filling up the car. Heavy. Squeezing. Dragging him down.

Brad screwed his hands tighter around the wheel. The headlights swept across a band of twilight forest as the car rounded another bend. Ahead, the trees ended abruptly. He pressed on the brakes. The glowing whiteness of the afternoon opened onto an ancient bridge.

It was barely wide enough for two cars, with low barriers on either side. Below the gray concrete span crawled a slow green river. A battered sign leaned nearby: LOCUST RIVER BRIDGE. Someone had spray-painted it with a different word: *Adamah*.

Something twisted inside him at the sight of it. He shook it off and rolled the Accord into the glare, across the bridge. Casting a sidelong glance at the water seventy feet below, he imagined stepping on the gas and giving the steering wheel a quick jerk. Down, down, into the—

No.

He just needed a drink.

As Brad crossed the bridge, the bleached bones of the town faded through the shimmering heat. Three Summers. The settlement occupied a half mile of shoreline. A main street connected to the bridge and cut through the heart of the silent town, between old brick buildings that lined the street with the slumping gallantry of veterans from some half-remembered war.

No birds perched along the town's uneven line of roofs. And no one was in sight. Just sunlight on the abandonment.

Immediately to his right as he bumped off the bridge stood a huge white house with faded green trim and wraparound porches on both floors. A small, high-grown yard and a rusted ironwork fence separated it from the street. A sign by the gate announced it as the Locust River Hotel. This time, the name had not been crossed out.

Brad's eyes turned. A placard on the side of the brick building opposite labeled the main street Adamah Road.

The dragging weight wavered.

Lifting the pill canister, he rattled it and pressed on the gas, following the street deeper into the town. All he needed was a glass of water.

Hazy-windowed drugstores, vacant warehouses, and four-story apartment buildings crept by outside. Shrouded windows. Empty alleys. Then an intersection. He stopped.

The street cutting in front of him was called Larkin Street, quiet as a cemetery path. A diner, the Theater Grill, occupied the first floor of a shuttered building out the passenger-side window. A silent cinema, the Adamah Theater, stood diagonally opposite, its sandstone façade rising in a worn art deco chevron, most of the large bulbs along its marquee sign shattered.

Somewhere in the back of his brain, curiosity clawed. Twisting around in his seat, he searched shop fronts along the cracked sidewalk for signs of life. Finding nothing, he leaned against the glass to examine the higher floors of the surrounding structures. Curtains stirred in several windows, as if faces had just withdrawn.

Where were the people? And the theater bulbs: Were they a tale of neglect or violence?

Violence.

Years spent chronicling it. Brutish and pointless.

The weight came rushing back, thick, cloaking him like oil.

He needed to escape. To rest. He drove on.

After a bit, the buildings ended, and two roads that bordered the edge of town curved in to join the main street. Beyond this

intersection, the last few mundane structures buttressed the street. On the right, the decaying brick hulk of a building called Knowles Furniture Warehouse slid past to reveal Grammy's Grocery, a long, low, sundried shell from the fifties fronted by a flotilla of rusted shopping carts. To the left stood a Texaco gas station, its sign faded pink. He idled for a moment in the dead street, examining each.

In the grocery store parking lot, someone had poured tar across cracks in the cement, smothering the thirsty grass that grew there, leaving stiff black shoots that stretched like charred fingers toward the sky.

A woman with short silver hair, wearing a gray sweater and dirty cargo pants, had just climbed from a green seventies model Ford Falcon. She was barefoot, her grimy, gray-fleshed feet pressed unyieldingly against the sweltering pavement. She stared at him through dark sunglasses.

Brad opted for the gas station. Pulling into the shade under the awning by one of the pumps, he examined the storefront. There were no lights on inside, but a car—an eighties model Jeep Wagoneer with the wood paneling missing from the driver's-side door—sat by the icebox out front. A paper sign taped to the door of the icebox said: FREE WATER. RESTROOMS OUT OF ORDER.

Clutching the cylinder of pills in one hand, Brad opened the car door. The crumbly quality of the air struck him as he stepped out. The air was hot and gritty and pricked against his skin. Maybe there was a mine nearby, stirring up the bowels of the earth. He traversed the trailing gas pump hoses and walked to the front of the establishment.

Pulling open the icebox door, he reached inside and felt the clammy air wrap around his hand. Plastic water bottles floated in a dim, lukewarm pond. He glanced again at the windows of the store. They were obscured by banners advertising beer and cigarettes.

Well, it wouldn't matter if the water was corrupted. His dead stomach wouldn't care. He fished a bottle from the cooler and let the door fall shut. The slimy label came away in his hand. He tossed it into an overflowing trash can by the gas pump.

Hornets orbited the columns that supported the canopy, buzzing in the stillness. His mind was buzzing, too. His hand shook as he opened the car door. This was it.

In the quiet of the car, the weight wrapped him. Smothering. Binding. He cracked open the bottle and took a quick sip. It was briny, but it opened his throat. Lifting the canister, he sucked two pills into his mouth. As he lowered his hand, the stinging smell of grease caught in his nose. Bile rushed into his throat. For a moment, there was nothing but the horrible, thick sweetness of raw oil inside the car. For a moment, orange flickered in the corner of his vision.
Fire.

Brad gulped another mouthful of brackish water to quench the sensations. Examining the back of his hand, he found it smeared with grease. Residue from changing the tire back on the interstate. Nothing to panic over. What did it matter, anyway? He pushed his sweaty hair back and let out a long breath.

Orange still danced at the edge of his right eye. It was his imagination. It should have gone away.

Brad turned his head.

A man was crossing the parking lot of Grammy's Grocery. He wore a bright orange jumpsuit, stained from head to foot with black smears. He walked with his right hand stretched out in front of him, and the slightest limp dragging at his right leg. He was just a hundred feet or so off and coming steadily. Coming toward the car. In the heat radiating from the pavement, his figure rippled.

The weight clenched around Brad's heart.

Water splashed as he set the bottle down. His fingers found the lock switch and pressed it. Facing forward, he shook the canister and downed two more pills. Blinking hard, he looked right again.

The man was crossing the barren street. Pebbles skittered before his heavy boots. The noonday sun pooled his shadow around his feet like an inverse halo.

Brad shut his eyes. He swallowed two more pills, then poured some of the water across his pounding head.

"Come on," he muttered. "Come on."

The frantic brain could play so many tricks to try to save itself. It was trying that now, throwing a rope to things he'd left in his wake, hauling them back into the light.

He forced two more pills into his mouth and opened his eyes.

The man was now on Brad's side of the road. Coming across the sidewalk. Coming toward the car. His arm bent at the elbow, palm open, rocking up and down. Beckoning.

Brad saw his face. Burned, blistered, peeling skin, glistening with black oil. Eyebrows scorched away. Steady gray eyes seared and shrunken to gravels.

He knew those eyes.

He tried to turn away, to flail, but couldn't. The weight was too pervasive, constricting his chest, dragging at his limbs, wringing even the color from his vision.

It was here.

The hand reached toward the passenger-side window. Thumping the glass. He *felt* it. Felt the car move.

His eyes winced shut. He forced the bottle to his lips, his head back, and downed the pills. That made six. No, eight.

The car rattled again. The hand was thumping against the window.

"Sir!" A muffled voice came through the glass. "Sir!"

Brad opened his eyes again. The heaviness hovered around him. The gray woman stood outside the window. The barefoot one who had looked at him across the parking lot. She was bent down, sunglasses pushed up on her head, peering in.

"Sir!"

Brad found the ignition and turned the key. He rolled the window down a crack.

The woman looked in at him. Her eyes were the same color as her hair. Her fingertips on the edge of the glass were painted with dry mud.

Brad stared at her.

"Are you the doctor?"

A portion of the pressure ebbed. He nodded faintly. “Yes. I’m the doctor.”

“Then go!” the woman said. She pounded on the glass again and pointed up the avenue. “Keep going, then first road on your left. Cross a bridge, and you’ll come to the house.”

I don't know why I answered yes. To ease the weight, perhaps, forestall the inevitable.

The town petered out into abandoned lawns and weed-cracked drives running up to ivy-shrouded houses. I turned left at the first road I came to, still in sight of the town, still with the gray woman visible in my rearview mirror. Some part of me already itched to pull this thread.

The road was straight, and the woods formed a green tunnel around it, diffusing the light to an even emerald gloaming. The hazy catacomb of forest absorbed the sound and motion of my car, adding to my delirium.

Three miles later, I passed back into the sun, crossing a little clay-stained bridge that spanned a dark creek. The road that followed was in bad shape. Thick, empty fields appeared on my left. The fields ran down a mile or so to the glimmering green line of the river. The heat and the pills and budding nausea blurred my vision.

I would have sped right past the old place if my gaze had not been suddenly pulled to the passenger-side window by that mysterious, magnetic presence possessed by things that wait.

—"The House of Dust"
Southern Gothic

THE HOUSE WAS up among the trees.

Brad turned onto the strangled drive. The car crept through stripes of shadow and light, following a course that bent away from the house, then swooped around toward it again, bypassing what must have been in some past age a manicured front lawn, lost now beneath hordes of walnut and sycamore. Sticks and gravel popped beneath the tires. Curtains of Spanish moss drooped from the oaks along the drive, brushing across the roof, reaching through the open passenger window with a soft hiss as the car passed. A few pieces of moss clung to the border of the window as the car entered a clearing before the house.

Even here, the light was subdued. The trees pressed in on the dirt and gravel patch, allowing only scant groundcover that consisted mostly of tall, gangly weeds. Brad stopped the car in front of the house and turned off the engine. Stepping out, he glanced up at the circle of sky above the clearing and for a moment imagined he was at the bottom of a hole. At the far top of the hole, rain clouds were overwhelming the sun.

He could do it here, he thought. At least he would be out of the sun.

But someone was in need. And he'd claimed to be the doctor.

As Brad lowered his head, something mounted up between the eaves snagged his vision. It was a rusty circle with eight spokes that connected to a shape suspended in the center. An old wheel? Odd decoration. The shape at the center of the wheel looked almost human. He took off his glasses and cleaned them on the edge of his untucked dress shirt, then put them back on. The thing remained obscure, almost a part of the flaking wood behind it.

Again, the heaviness cloaking him pulsed.

He should take out his phone and snap a picture.

But all that was over. All the pictures and interviews and investigations he did led back to this same feeling. He grabbed the canister of pills and the water bottle from the seat and slammed the door.

Walking around the car, he looked up at the house. The architecture recalled other nineteenth-century plantation abodes: a huge

front porch on the ground floor, and a second porch on the floor above, all supported by ivy-wrapped columns. The façade had been painted white at some point, then left to the mercy of the years and the secluded sunlight of the clearing, which had weathered it to a pale gray. The house rippled in the heat, a dead face beneath the surface of a pond. But it wasn't dead. The other houses he'd visited scattered around the South that shared its architecture and its age were corpses propped up behind mowed lawns and painted fences, bright-windowed and manicured and ready for visitation.

Here, the windows looked out from the back of the porches like deep-socketed eyes, panes hazy with a history of dusty summers, stained curtains for eyelids stitched shut with cobwebs. But not dead.

The house had been asleep for many years, he decided. Soon he would join it. Asleep. Eyelids closed forever in the dust. He shook another pill between his lips and climbed the front steps.

A rocking chair sat on the porch, between him and the front door. Its faded gray wood matched the house. Someone had once sat in this chair to rock slowly in the evening, to look over the breathless clearing and the gloomy trees. How would it be to sit down in that chair, to finish the pills, to drift off? He paused by the chair.

He had said he was the doctor. He *should* check on the person in the house. But what could he do? His forefinger trailed across the armrest.

A slow, cold tingle broke out on the finger. Pulling it away, he found dust clinging to the sweaty tip. Silvery. Sharp, almost. He rubbed it off and skirted the chair, avoiding nail heads that jutted from the shrunken floorboards.

The house's door was oak, swollen and weathered black. Brad knocked twice.

The moments dripped by, the rustle of leaves joined by the creak of withered timber. From the edge of his vision at least two dozen more rocking chairs ranged across the porch. He turned his head to study them. The nearest one leaned far forward. The next was leaned back. So down the line, all caught at the edge of movement.

Who had arranged them like that? Obviously no one besides the sick person lived here, otherwise the door would be opening. What would one person do with all those—

He stopped himself. He didn't need the beginning of another story. Just an ending.

Tipping his head back, he swallowed another pill.

Still staring down the porch, he reached up to knock again when the fog inside his brain thickened further. Dizziness erupted. His hand splayed out as he braced himself against the wood. How many pills was this? Ten? Eleven? It was time to lie down. Brad pushed himself away from the door.

Take a seat, Brad, he thought. *There are so many. Surely one must be for you.*

He felt it as his fingers left the wood: something cool and smooth.

It came into focus on the door like blood welling through a bandage: a tarnished metal symbol embedded in the wood. The same symbol he'd seen on the peak of the house. A circle, with a human body at the center. The figure reached out toward the circle with two legs and six arms. Its head was bald. It had no eyes.

Brad backed away from the door as grass sprouted from his spine. He couldn't stay on the porch. The thing wouldn't let him go to sleep. It would demand to be understood. It would demand that he open the door and enter the dark house.

Raking his hair back, he descended the steps to the clearing and walked quickly along the edge of the porch to the corner. A faint trail wandered along the side of the house through weeds and ivy. He stuffed the pill bottle into his breast pocket and followed the path. The air was swampy. The woods pressed in close on his left.

His hand snagged a vine as he walked, and he idly ripped it down. A portion of a window frame up on the second floor broke apart and rotten wood rained down. Brad paused.

The surest way to get someone's attention was to break something. But no barking dogs or angry voices disturbed the stillness.

Because the owner is inside, dead, he thought.

At the back of the house was a sunlit clearing where the moldering smell of the woods faded. Sugar rose around his knees, blown from the trumpets of hundreds of daffodils bursting in small yellow explosions from beds all across the yard. The land sloped gently beneath his feet, stretching down to the dark wall of the woods a hundred feet off. Milky air filled his lungs; that funeral smell of flowers.

Once more the weight dragged on his shoulders. So many flowers. Like the funeral this morning when his fiancée screamed at him. Like the funeral long ago when the awful load first came to settle across him.

This would be a good place to finish it.

He stopped somewhere near the middle of the garden and took the pills from his pocket. The water bottle crinkled in his left hand as he unscrewed the cap. Up above, the clouds were congealing, but down here the air was motionless. He closed his eyes. He opened his mouth. The canister's hard lip met his own.

A raspy sigh—long, low, crawling—entered his ear. A whisper. His hand froze.

The grease smears on his skin burned. Their scent filled his nose. With a sharp crack, the pill canister split in his hand. The water bottle thumped into the grass and the liquid chuckled softly as it drained away. Dizziness washed over him. His knees buckled. He slumped to the ground.

As he lifted his head and opened his eyes, he saw two bare feet protruding from a flower bed three yards away.

For a moment, his head cleared. *The person in need.* He crawled toward the feet. The daffodils filling the bed were different—yellow petals with tiny reddish trumpets. Clambering in among them, he pulled the stems and blossoms aside.

A body lay facedown in a little hollow in the dirt. It was a woman. Brilliant white hair spread across her shoulders and halfway down her back. A white dress shrouded her body, snug enough to be flattering and slack enough to be comfortable, a cross between a ballgown and a nightgown, with lacy sleeves and shoulders. A young

woman's dress. But the bony feet peeping beneath the hem were dusty gray, laced by a patchwork of ruptured veins.

Still, it was her posture that drew his attention most. Her arms were thrown out before her, and her hands were buried in the dirt. Clawlike furrows extended behind her hands, and daffodils lay uprooted around her. She had been digging. Burrowing into the earth.

"Ma'am?" Brad said. "Can you hear me?"

Bending closer, he caught a glimpse of her face in profile, pressed against the dirt. She was certainly old, but she hadn't aged in the normal way. No wrinkles ran along her jaw or gathered around the visible eye. Her face had eroded, like a statue with the fine details rubbed away. The eye was open, the brow wrinkled slightly. Frustration. She hadn't finished the grave.

"Ma'am?" he said again. "Can you hear me?"

A sick twist of joy gripped part of him. The horrible part that lived for strange deaths and the circumstances surrounding them. The part that thrilled at the thought of a new investigation to lift his burden.

He straightened. It wasn't a good idea to disturb the body, but he needed to be sure she was gone. And he needed to see the rest of her face.

Trembling—from the drugs, of course—he reached for her shoulder.

"You dressed for the occasion, I see." The drawling, broken voice came from behind him.

Brad twisted around. Two men were coming through the garden. The leader, the one who had spoken, wore a black suit and shirt. He was reedy, and his head was reluctantly bald. His skin clung to his skull. His eyes were thin and black.

Brad bent stiffly to brush his own dark clothes: jeans and a dress shirt. He used the opportunity to locate the pill bottle among the flowers. "It's what I always wear." Slipping the bottle into his pocket, he stood. "I found her this way. She's dead."

The men stopped a few feet short of the flower bed. The second one, dressed in khakis and carrying a medical bag, tried to step past the first. The bony-faced man stuck out his arm. "No, no. If a fake doctor can tell she's dead, there's not much a real one can do."

His bright dark eyes stared at the woman for several seconds, then moved back to Brad. "You can head on out, now." He glanced at the doctor. "You too. Sorry for the inconvenience."

The doctor pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and nodded, wiping his face. "Of course, of course." He caught Brad's eyes for just a moment, then turned and hiked toward the house. Brad stepped out of the flowers. He glanced back as the man in black crouched beside the woman in white.

"Go on," the man said. As he bent farther over the body, Brad caught sight of a pistol strapped to his hip beneath the coat. Brad's pulse stumbled and he turned and walked away.

At the front of the house he watched the doctor toss his bag in the back seat of a silver Dodge pickup. He took a little brush out of the door pocket and proceeded to go over his clothes inch by inch. He looked at Brad as he stood, hands in his pockets, watching. "How'd you get this far out?"

Brad shrugged. "I was just driving. I ended up here."

The doctor tapped his head. "I mean up here. I saw the pill bottle you picked up back there. I see your posture now. You're in some pretty deep water."

Glancing up as wind stirred the treetops around the clearing, the doctor continued, "I know things can get kind of lonely in a rural community. Especially this one. I've been out here several times over the past year to check on that woman, all hours of the day and night. But the birds never sing. Nor the cicadas. It's eerie, almost. You can hear the dust falling. At least there's the wind."

"My dad used to say wind is the cousin of loneliness," Brad said absently. For an instant, there was a second hand in his pocket, wrapped around his own. His dad's hand as they wandered the Enchanted Forest, just the two of them, on a Tuesday afternoon. Never Mom, they'd already split. If Dad had cared about family

time, she'd said, he wouldn't work a job where he was gone a month at a time. So they walked alone, listening to the wind move through the Enchanted Forest. *Wind is the cousin of loneliness, Brad. You learn that out there. Maybe you're already learning it here.*

His throat throbbed. He squeezed the canister in his pocket.

"That's interesting." The doctor had finished brushing off his shoes. "In that case, I'd advise you to get in your car and follow me out of here. GPS can't help you in these parts."

Brad withdrew his hands, folding his arms. "I'll take my chances. Thanks anyway."

The man climbed into his truck, pulled around through the weeds, and roared down the drive in a cyclone of dust.

Brad sat down on the porch steps. He drew the canister from his pocket and examined the cracks in the orange plastic. He could hear his labored heartbeat. The blood was moving sluggishly through his veins. A few more pills and it would all be over. He needed the water, though. It was lying back there by the flower bed. Near the body. Drained away. But perhaps a few drops remained.

He stood up and walked toward the corner of the house. His feet caught as the man in black appeared around the edge of the house. He was carrying the woman. Her white hair fell over his arm and stuck to his suit, clinging there as if by static, the individual strands standing out against the fabric like lightning across a dark sky.

The man's face reddened when he saw Brad. "I told you to leave. You're on my property now."

"I left something back there."

"Doesn't matter. Time to go."

Brad stopped a dozen feet from him and stared through the hazy lenses of his glasses. "I'm going to get it, and then I'll go. I see you've got a gun under that coat. If you want to shoot me while I'm walking back there, fine. I really don't care."

The man scowled. Something else moved in his eyes, though, as he examined Brad's careless stance. A hunger, almost. A gleam of admiration kindled by the frictional spark between them. Quickly,

he quenched it and shifted the body in his arms. "Want to atone for your lie?"

"What?" Brad said.

"She needs a ride to the cemetery. We don't have a hearse."

The word uncloaked a gray memory. Brad, much younger, riding in a car, following one of those dark, distended vehicles along a January road. His mom, tapping the steering wheel, impatient at the procession's slowness. Then, the frigid graveyard.

"You want to use my car as a hearse?"

The man nodded slowly.

Brad stared at him. A thunderclap broke over some distant field and vibrated across the intervening miles and shook the air between them.

"Come on." The man stepped past him. "We need to bury her before the rain comes."

After crossing the clay-stained bridge, the darkness in the tunnel of trees was made heavier by the approaching storm. I switched on the headlights and discovered dozens of cars parked along both sides of the road, sitting crookedly in the depression edging the woods. Under the passing headlight beams, solemn, staring faces faded in and out of existence behind the windshield of each vehicle. The people of Three Summers had come to pay their respects.

"We've been expecting this," the man in black said by way of explanation.

"Why didn't they come to the house?" I asked.

"That island was her ground," he replied. "Invitation only."

—"The House of Dust"
Southern Gothic

IN THE BACK SEAT, the body lay quietly. In the back glass, headlights flashed as the cars turned to follow.

The bony-faced man rolled down his window and let the restless air wander in from beneath the canopy of trees. "So, what are you, exactly?"

Something itched on the back of Brad's neck. Her lifeless hand had brushed him there as they laid her in the car. He nodded toward the back seat, fighting the fog behind his eyes. "Tell me her name."

"So, a reporter type."

"I'm driving the woman to her final rest. Figured I could know."

"Final rest . . ." the man said contemplatively.

"What about you? What's your name?"

"Name's Sorrel. I'm the sheriff of this little backwater, doing my best to keep things quiet and peaceable. Your name?"

"Brad."

"Well, Brad, what pulled you down into our part of the world? Things getting tough for a writer out there?"

The man was studying him in the windshield reflection. Brad's temples throbbed as he caught sight of himself in the rearview mirror. Gaping pupils. Glassy eyes. Glistening forehead. Overdose. The symptoms were familiar.

"Dredging for a story, huh?" The sheriff spoke slowly. "Something impossible but true and with a happy ending."

"No." It came out unbidden as the car bumped along the ruptured road. "No happy endings in my field. Just justice. Sometimes."

"And what field is that?"

"True crime."

"Novelist?"

"Magazine. *Southern Gothic*."

"Pretty popular?"

It would be if you found a good story, his editor said in the back of his mind. He was grateful for the approaching mouth in the tree tunnel. "Right or left?"

"Left," Sorrel said. "We'll take her to the old Simmons Creek Cemetery."

Fat drops splattered heavily on the windshield as they turned out onto Adamah Road. Streetlamps glowed to life back toward Three Summers. Brad hit the defog, and Sorrel rolled up his window. On either side of the road, behind narrowing fields, the forest edged closer. His hands quivered on the wheel.

“You okay?” the sheriff said.

“What was your relationship to her?” Brad asked.

“I thought we dropped that subject, Brad.”

“You mentioned back at the house that the property was yours now. I thought you two might be related.”

Sorrel’s knuckles tapped the glass. “So you are looking for a story.”

Was he? That itch on his neck burned through the haze. He imagined the old woman’s dead hand rising up from the back seat, her fingers burrowing beneath the headrest and coming out behind his neck, her dirty nails stroking his skin. Offering relief. A story.

The car bumped across a set of railroad tracks, rusted and weed-infested and desolate in both directions.

“Turn right up here on Simmons,” Sorrel commanded.

They arrived at a road called Simmons Pike, bordering open fields. Across the road, in the distance, a house crouched on a low hill, silhouetted against the slate-gray sky.

Sorrel leaned over and punched the car horn.

Its startled bray broke the silence and Brad jerked. “I’m driving! Please don’t touch the wheel when I’m—”

“That wasn’t for you,” Sorrel said. “It was for the folks out there. I want them to come. They need the closure.”

Brad’s gaze hovered on the field as he turned right onto Simmons Pike. The fading horn blast bounced like a pebble off the side of the lonely, distant house. And then, through the rain-streaked window, he saw figures coming out of the ground at the base of the hill. One after another, they appeared from the earth; they paused to look toward the road, then climbed toward cars and trucks parked on the slanted lawn before the house.

It was impossible to tell from this angle, but they must have clambered out of some sort of pit or ditch. A series of depressions or trenches must run across the field parallel to the road. Irrigation, maybe. But irrigation of what? It was a sea of empty grass.

The itching on his neck was maddening. He blinked, and they were past the field, trees enveloping the road. Sorrel turned and reached into the back seat.

Brad heard the flaps of a cardboard box parting. The man sat forward again, nose wrinkled, pinching a seven-by-ten-inch pulp paper booklet between two fingers. "*Southern Gothic*," he murmured. "My, my."

The cover painting depicted a lighthouse on a dark and stormy night, flashing its yellow beam on a capsized yacht. "The Breakwater Sirens," by Lamar Hughes.

Sorrel flipped through the pages. "You folks play up the supernatural, huh?"

Chewing down his annoyance, Brad said, "That was a Halloween issue. I only do real stuff."

"Huh." He examined the back cover. "What kind of circulation do you have?"

"Around three hundred thousand."

A church spire pierced the forest skyline on the right side of the road, tapering up toward the barren clouds. Adverse winds had stripped it, leaving flapping tar paper and dangling shingles. "Is that the place?"

Sorrel closed the magazine. "That's it."

The church and its cemetery sat on a peninsula above the Locust River.

Kudzu swarmed from the trees and the creek bank to the left of the church, blanketing the structure. Vines ringed the windows and clung to every inch of board and crawled across the roof. Only the spire had been spared. It strained upward like the arm of a drowning man pecked and flayed by seabirds.

None of the surrounding trees or ground had been swamped by the Kudzu; the invasive vines had been unusually selective.

Brad swung the car off the road, continuing on a gravel track that led through high grass, past the tilting headstones in the graveyard. A white wooden sign stood by the church doors: SIMMONS CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH.

Brad stopped near the church. The rest of the caravan filled the drive behind.

“Looks like you’ll have to stick around for a few minutes,” Sorrel observed. “I’m sure that’s no problem.” As he leaned toward the door, he paused and bent down to retrieve something from the floorboard. “Well, that’s pretty. Belong to you?”

A ring. Four prongs on a white gold band clutching a solitaire diamond.

Her ring.

For an instant, it wasn’t the sheriff in the passenger seat; it was his fiancée. Her wheezing filling the car. Her body crushed against the door, trying to get away. Her palms smearing down her face; her lips stretching toward a scream.

Brad leaned over and snatched the ring.

Sorrel’s fingers hovered a moment. Then he got out and opened the back door and retrieved the body from the back seat. The rain had lightened. He laid the body in the grass outside Brad’s window. All along the drive, people climbed from their vehicles. “Line up,” Sorrel called. “Might as well show some respect.” Then he turned and walked toward the church.

Brad opened the glove box and tossed the ring inside. It clinked softly against the RIA .38 Special cushioned atop the yellowed owner’s manual. His fingers hovered for an instant before he slammed the hatch shut. Squirring the fractured pill bottle from his pocket, he threw it on the floor mat.

Outside, people filed around the car. Some stopped by the body, others processed out into the dripping grass and headstones. There were over a hundred of them, he guessed, and most were over fifty, though their sun-battered faces made age hard to judge.

It was their eyes. They weren’t ragged eyes, blistered by grief like those he’d seen earlier in the day at the funeral with his fiancée, those eyes that withered what they looked at. They weren’t even like those that had filed past him at a funeral much further in the past. The ones that had crinkled into sad smiles for his mother and then turned scornfully on him, a boy wearing headphones to the service. He’d

had to. He'd needed to drown the feeling of gathering pressure. It didn't matter that he couldn't hear the pastor. It was better, in fact. His dad was dead. He wasn't coming back. Lies wouldn't lift the weight.

No, the eyes of the people in this cemetery were round and so wide open, they reminded him of those belonging to cave creatures, beings of perpetual darkness.

Too late he remembered that he had wanted to study the old woman's face.

The people had formed a double-sided line between the body and a spot two hundred feet away among the gravestones. Those nearest bent and lifted her between them. Together, they passed her slowly along the line, her body rising and falling along the row of arms like an item on a conveyor belt.

Sorrel came out of the church and walked briskly to the end of the line. He began to dig rapidly, tossing chunks of earth into a heap. By the time the body reached him, he already stood in a knee-deep trench. Maybe he was also the town undertaker, Brad mused.

Again, the buzzing sensation touched his neck. He reached back finally to scratch. But instead of giving relief, the tingling spread to his fingers. He brought them in front of his face.

His hand was smeared with pale dust. The same dust he had found on the rocking chair at the house.

Brad twisted around. His toes bunched together inside his shoes.

The rear seats were hazy where the body had lain. Reaching out, he scraped his fingers across the upholstery, gathering the dust under his nails. He examined it under the light of the windshield, rolling it between his fingers. The woman had been digging among flowers, so perhaps it was a garden chemical, like Sevin Dust. Or maybe a powder she had worn? That would reconcile with its presence on the arm of the rocking chair.

His arm tremored as he opened the car door. He stepped out and crouched down, rubbing his hands in the sodden grass. An erratic wind scraped the high stalks against the headstones and set the trees around the cemetery singing. Brad glanced up as a silent group of

birds soared across the river. They swirled like leaves and came to rest on a derelict industrial tower on the far bank. It was gray, matching the clouds behind it, and streaked with rust. He imagined he could hear cries echoing up the side of that tower and being broadcast across the water—long hopeless cries.

Brad blinked. The sound was coming from this side of the river. It was coming from the people. He stood up.

The line of people had spread out among the graves, and a low murmur rose from the assembly. Hesitantly, he moved forward.

They were all talking among themselves. But none seemed to hear the other. Each was carrying on an intimate conversation with themselves. Delivering their own eulogy. Preaching their own sermon. The eyes, so wide a few minutes ago, drifting closed. The hard lines around the mouths were softening, melting each solemn expression into soft contentment. Lax lips forming words. One word. A sighing-sounding word.

His heartbeat lurched faster. As he moved through the murmuring mass, Brad tried to recall similar rituals in his ten years crisscrossing the South. This wasn't Full Gospel or Pentecostal. Was it some other fringe Christian sect? Yet the whole ceremony seemed somehow disconnected from the church. There was no pastor present, just the sheriff.

Sorrel was standing waist-deep in the grave. The shovel was stabbed in the mound of earth behind him. The body of the woman lay before him in the grass. He scooped the slender body in his arms and crouched down, disappearing into the earth.

Abruptly, the people around Brad began to sink to the ground. The younger ones dropped to their knees in the grass, while the older ones braced themselves on gravestones as they knelt. The silver-haired woman who had directed him to the house walked through their midst, eyes half-closed, holding a shovel.

Sorrel's head appeared above the surface. His face was down, mouth flat, as he examined the body beneath him. When the woman approached, he glanced up and took in the scene. "No!" It was like a gunshot in the quiet.

Scrambling from the hole, he spread his arms, black sleeves smeared orange with mud. “It’s over! Y’all go home now. It’s finished.”

The murmuring stopped. The eyelids lifted. The faces hardened.

“You’ve paid your respects,” Sorrel said a little more softly. “It’s time to go.”

Like disenchanting worshippers, the people rose to their feet. Their faces seemed to sag, burdened with weariness. They flashed glances at one another and gathered their plaids and denims around themselves tighter. For a moment, Brad felt it, too: A viscous chill seeping up from the ground. Warping the air. Seeming to stretch the sheriff’s voice as he repeated his command: “Go.”

Then, just as quickly, the aura was gone. Brad looked around.

The hiss of grass snaking around shoes was the only sound as the people departed. The silver-haired woman was the last to go. She threw her shovel down and stalked away.

When the last car and truck pulled out of the churchyard, Sorrel rubbed his brow, turned back to the hole, and began to shovel dirt. The shovel crunched. Rain splattered the leaves of the kudzu-shrouded church.

Blood hammered in Brad’s skull. He couldn’t leave. He stepped forward.

“You, too,” Sorrel said over his shoulder as he approached. “Don’t mind me. I can walk back.”

Brad ignored him, picking up the fallen shovel. His muscles were jittery. His mind, too. He gripped the shaft and approached the grave. Ramming the shovel into the dirt, he hefted the loaded blade and turned toward the grave. He extended it out over the void and looked down.

The old woman lay at the bottom, her lower body obscured by dirt. The white dress was damp with rain. Her arms were at her sides, hands turned up—an almost plaintive posture. Slowly, he turned the shovel. The dirt fell.

And then her face moved. Her eyes.

They opened.

They turned toward him.

The pupils expanded like sudden sinkholes.

And then the dirt hit her face.

Brad stumbled forward. The slick edge of the grave crumbled beneath his feet.

As his shoes galloped on the collapsing brink, a hand grabbed his collar, yanking him away from the edge.

“You’ll fall in!” Sorrel shouted in his ear. “Stay back!”

The sheriff released him. Brad collapsed, coughing into the grass. Loosening his collar, he tried to swallow the swarming mass of astonishment that filled his throat. The woman’s gaping eyes burned like sunspots in his vision.

It couldn’t be. It was the pills, so thick in his system, warping his mind. He could feel it coming from his stomach now, surging up his throat—stale water and dissolving chemicals.

He wretched it all out and stayed hunched on the grass for a while, fists clenching the stems, shivering as the weight evaporated. The endless cycle had reasserted itself. The aim that had driven him onward for ten years would not release him. He could not break free. He could not leave. He had to *know*.

When he sat up, a stooped, bald-headed man dressed in black was standing halfway out of one of the church doors. He was gripping the door to support himself, and he was staring at Sorrel. The sheriff, his face shedding sweat, was steadily refilling the grave.

Brad stood up. He walked over, cleaning his glasses on his shirt. When he spoke, the flat sound of his voice was startling against the stillness. “I want to rent out that house.”

“Not for rent,” the sheriff panted.

“Just a couple weeks. Maybe a month. I can give you five hundred dollars right now.”

The flat of the shovel came down on the grave, packing the dirt. “What are you hoping to find?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

The sheriff straightened up and glanced back at the empty drive, rubbing the rainwater from his brow. Brad followed his glance to the church. The stooped man was gone.

“Look, I . . .” Brad imagined the woman beneath the soil, blinking back the mud, screaming into the smothering wet blackness. He replaced his glasses. “I’m sorry if this is an annoyance. It is to me, too, sometimes. But it’s what I do. I’ve got to keep doing it. If you say no, then I’ll get a hotel in the nearest town and come snooping around every day.”

Sorrel slammed the shovel into the dirt and offered a bland smile. “That ring in the car . . .”

The rain fell between them.

“What about it?”

“There’s two of you, isn’t there? There’d be two of you in that house.”

“There might be.”

“There would be,” Sorrel said. He stared heavily at the grave. “So, what’s her name?”