

GOthic NATURE



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COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

Forest Bones

Amara George Parker

'Oh, if trees could lick their lips.'

Something stirs in the black of a moonless night.

It wriggles and creeps and devours.

The feeble breeze bears no tender scent of the dying summer; only the stench of death, wrought rank in mist, pervades the lungs of the earth.

The stagnant air trembles, disturbed by the beat of the blackest of hearts.

From your bed, on the edge of dreams, you hear The Tree screaming your name.

And you wait.

#

Just as he had on the eve of every birthday, he dreamed of The Tree. It rose above him, its pale twisted trunk a pained monument on the dead black earth; a body writhing in agony, spine bent and arched toward a bleak and cloud-shrouded sky. There were no leaves on its limbs. The air around it didn't stir; nothing breathed and Elliott's lungs ached as he tried to keep his fear silent.

Each year the tree grew, until now it towered above him, humming with a deadly intensity.

The voice—its non-voice—was the same. It emanated from somewhere within the twisted limbs, channelled through roots or earth or air Elliott didn't know, but this year, as every year before, it struck the same point inside his skull, scratching at his brain; a half-numb painful pleading that he couldn't shut out.

Help, it trembled.

Each year it begged and each year Elliott was too afraid to answer. But this time, he did.

Help.

For a moment, he stood, transfixed.

And then, summoning the courage not to run, not to fight, but to stand and face his terror, he turned to the skeletal tree.

‘How?’ he said. His voice shook but he forced the words into the air. ‘How can I help?’

And the reply, thrumming inside his head like insidious machinery, came low and dreadful.

Let.

Me.

Eat you up.

#

‘How’s it going then, Tom?’ The sky was sallow-grey, and Elliott had driven through the day’s long hours from where he’d been working at the old lighthouse. His van was now parked on the driveway of Tom Whitley, and both Elliott and his vehicle looked worse for wear. ‘Penny-Jane phoned and said there’s been something up with my pipes?’

Tom Whitley knitted his eyebrows together and sucked the yellow dusk air in through his teeth. ‘You not been by the house yet?’

‘Thought I’d pick you up first’.

‘Ah, you trust my judgement I see’.

‘I trust the best and only plumber in the village when he tells me I got a burst pipe’.

‘Flattery won’t get you a discount, Elliott’. He chuckled. ‘Let me get my things together, I’ll follow you’.

‘I’ll get a pot of tea brewing’.

Tom laughed. ‘I wouldn’t count on it’.

Elliott swung himself into the driver’s seat and felt the miles of road he’d put behind him leech at his bones, and suddenly the journey home seemed longer than a few minutes. He’d rounded the corner of the main street before he heard Tom’s engine growl to life and the plumber’s van’s tyres roll out of the drive.

And then he was on, out of the village centre and nearing the woods that bordered the road that led to home. It felt an age since he had been there. The sun had started to creep down behind the hills, and to his right, Elliott saw its glow flutter auburn on slivers of the woods, and burn the ground at the feet of trees a rusted amber.

He had the window open, the scent of summer grazing his face and teasing his hair. Then, through the window’s open jaws came the cry of crows. His eyes followed the sound to the right of the road, where trees met tarmac at the foot of the hill. It was lined with a darkness that was dense and watchful; black-shadow sentinels with bright metal eyes.

Elliott slowed. They seemed to be waiting.

The van juddered to a halt, the ratchet of the handbrake bringing the road through the woods to silence.

Behind the line of crows, the woods went on, stretching up into the hillside; but to the left, where their mirrored counterparts should stand, there was nothing but white mist. White obscured the trunks. All white. Like the clouds had sunk to the ground, and the world was all the wrong way up. Elliott's only reference point was the very tip of the canopy, a thumbnail-strip separating the white of the forest realm from the clouds of the sky above. And then it was gone.

Elliott studied the blank mass. The village, situated as it was in a scoop of land between hills, often found itself cloaked in mist and fog, particularly when autumn had taken hold. But this didn't feel right to him. It behaved differently. It *behaved*.

He shook it off and put his paranoia down to being road-tired. His hand reached for the gear stick, and he allowed the van to move up to second as he switched on his high beams.

The mist began to curl outwards from the treeline. It reached out onto the road. It began to seep towards his van. Elliott laughed at his own jolting reaction as the crows took to the sky like sudden splashes of ink thrown into the grey heavens. The engine stalled.

He took a deep breath. Steadied.

Elliott knew the woods, and he knew human nature. He knew how people panicked and lost themselves; familiar routes distorted under the lens of fear.

The mist had closed behind him now, like skin healing up over a wound.

Elliott fumbled to restart his engine, telling himself he was only anxious to see home, but there was only a repeated rasp that led once more back to that overwhelming silence. He leaned back in the driver's seat, hands smoothing along the steering wheel and listened. Noises

from the village filtered around in the mist, contorted and echoed and amplified like kaleidoscopic images. He tried the ignition again.

Nothing.

He heard a rumble of tyres and engine behind him and flashed his lights.

‘Hey! Tom!’

The rumble slowed, like thunder falling asleep. Elliott opened the van’s door and stepped out onto the road he couldn’t see. ‘Tom! My van’s given up. Too much for one day, I think. Well, for both of us... Fancy giving us a ride?’ Elliott strained his ears. But there was no response, only, in the distance, a peel of church bells.

‘Tom...?’ But he couldn’t even hear the church bells now. The mist had grown so dense that Elliott was sure that if he let go of the driver’s door, he’d lose his van.

‘Well’. He reached into the glove compartment and felt for the flashlight. He tried to force this to be casual, a normal event but fear had struck his vocal cords, and he heard it in himself. ‘Looks like it’s the long way round’. He pushed the van door closed behind him and pocketed the keys.

He’d left his hazards on, and their muted orange flash hardly dented the white, but it felt to Elliott like a silent scream, a warning, for him to go back to his van; to not leave his one point of reference and safety in a deformed world of mist and uncertainty.

The woods were cotton-thick and quiet as he stepped off the road and into their silence.

#

The Witch inhaled, remembering what it was to feel the cold, dank touch of the earth and its hollows.

She felt for her arms, but there were none. In their stead, thick, rotten branches stretched out into thinly spun twigs, their weight barely held in the naked boughs. Her breasts were changed into bark, rough and dead; there was no trace of the woman she once was, save her arching spine, now the curved trunk twisted like the animal in pain she had been when they had bound her here.

I remember, she thought.

And I am coming back.

She felt down into the earth, where faint traces of the magic that had rekindled her strength still lingered.

Still further she went into the earth's depths, and she began to feel the churning of the earthworms and the maggots, the desperate seeking of scavengers, and the freshly dead leaking their lifeblood into the ground. But nothing compared. She could taste the fragile potency of the soul that dwelled in the house in the woods. She hungered for it. She hungered for vengeance. And she was ready to take it.

#

At school, Elliott had learned that Heaven existed in the sky—a kingdom in the clouds. And so, as a boy, if the day brought mist, he'd be terrified to leave the house, afraid that he would inadvertently step into the afterlife and Death would snap him up.

His mother, somewhat differently minded to the school, loved the wilds and spoke of her connection to the unseen spirits that seemed to occupy them. She had at every opportunity after the school's erroneous lessons, taken him out into the backwoods and mountains, in all

conditions, until he was at ease trekking across barren ridges above the clouds, and in dense forest, or marshlands beneath the stars; navigating the land with a healthy respect for its indiscriminate perils, and not one bit afraid of death or stumbling into *Heaven* by mistake.

The tarmac's uniform flat gave out to the uneven floor of the woods. Leaf and twig rustled and cracked underneath Elliott's step and provided him with his only orientation. The mist felt dense as he breathed in. *Fog?* He couldn't remember what the difference was.

He'd tried to keep heading west from the road, and hoped that soon enough he'd either hit the boundary to the house or something else he'd recognise that would lead him home. He crept on through the trees, pressing his palms into rough bark to steady himself, and made sure with each step that the ground underneath was solid enough to take his weight. He asked himself if perhaps his slow movement was because he wanted his footsteps to be inaudible, undetectable.

A cracking from the woods made him stop. Elliott held his breath, waited, his ears pricked and head turned with blind eyes in the direction of the noise. The woods were silent, too... listening. Bracken and undergrowth snapped; the sound cut Elliott on his back like a bite of static.

'Hullo?' he called. He noted how the mist clamped those tentative syllables into its white. More creaks and cracks struck out from where he supposed the trees stood. Elliott felt the pounding of his heart in his ears, its drumbeat growing louder and more erratic, and the shape of his breath following into disturbed disorder.

He told himself not to panic. Panic leads to rash decisions, and that'll get a person lost. He slowed his breathing and checked his phone for signal. He wondered whether Tom Whitley would still be there by the time he got back to the house, and then allowed himself to grumble about how tedious it would be if he missed him. He almost smiled to himself in those woods, in the mist, at the bizarreness of it all.

He checked again, but his phone's screen showed no bars. He hoped Tom would wait.

And then, as his eyes slid from the phone to the ground, he saw something slither.

Follow me home, it said.

Creaks of splintered trees echoed like laughter around the wood, and a wild thing yipped in pain, and Elliott knew then that the words he had heard were as real as the sounds in the woods and that *something* was here and it was calling to him.

Follow me, it said.

Follow me.

And he followed.

#

Oh, if trees could lick their lips. She couldn't *see* it yet, but she could sense it, there, tickling at the fronds of the earth, humming. And she couldn't wait, *couldn't wait* to eat it all up.

Eat.

It.

All.

Up.

#

Elliott heard the skulls of dead creatures crunch under his boots. He was stumbling forward, hands outstretched; he feared what could be behind rather than what lay ahead of him, and so

he lurched wildly from step to step, trying to outrun his imagination. His fear pushed him onward through the trees, blind step and ragged breath guiding him.

The mist was closing in on him now, scratching at his face and lungs and he was running, not feeling the impact of branch and leaf and thorn as he fumbled through their tangle. On and on he ran, convinced that should he stop he'd be a dead man, that Death would find him in the trees and mist, and that up ahead, impossibly, he'd find shelter, he'd find home.

And then, a light. It burned through the mist with a jaundice-yellow glow. Elliott latched on to its beam and hurried, helter-skelter for the light. And then the toe of his boot dug into something hard and unbending, and the heels of his hands found the burning graze of tarmac.

Tom Whitley's laughter rumbled down at him.

'Hey, slow down there. You can't run in this weather—visibility's a goddamn joke'. His outstretched hand reached out from the mist. 'You alright?'

Elliott let Tom haul him to his feet and rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'Uhuh. Yeah'. He looked back and saw the mist hanging thick and low beneath the treetops. He'd circled back around to the road. Tom Whitley's van was parked with full beams blazing next to his own abandoned van. 'Just need some sleep, that's all'. His mind felt an unexpected horror curl over and nest into his thoughts. 'Mind if we take your van, Tom? My engine needs a rest'.

'So do you, it seems. I'll give you a lift back, but let's save taking a look at that pipe 'til tomorrow, huh?'

Elliott gave a grim nod. He felt his friend looking sideways at him as he slammed the passenger door closed behind him.

Inside, the confines of the van shrank. Elliott watched in the wing-mirror as the sight of his van disappeared from view.

Tom cleared his throat.

‘You, uh, you sure you’re okay, Elliott? That was a terrible business with Don...’

Elliott grunted. He watched the white as they rolled past—almost inscrutable shifts. Shadows? Shapes? *Blood on bone and mist*, he thought. *Why did he think that?*

‘...kind of you to take in young Jacob, ‘specially after all that happened with Violet. Mand’ said if there’s anything we can do, just give us a call. You know where we are’.

Blood on bone and mist.

‘Yeah, sure. Hey, Tom? Could you let me out here? I think I could use the walk—been cooped up in one of these all day’.

‘Are you sure? I gotta drive past yours anyway—’

Blood on mist.

‘Yeah. Drop me here. My legs need the stretch’.

It’s watching me.

The door had clunked open before the wheels stopped turning.

‘Hey! Elliott! Your flashlight!’

It’s watching me.

It’s watching me.

BIOGRAPHY

Amara George Parker is a London-based writer, editor, and Best of the Net nominated poet whose poetry, fiction, and essays have been featured in various publications, including *Mslexia*, *Mooky Chick*, *Ogma*, *Elevator Stories*, *Prismatica*, *Sufi Journal*, *Sage Cigarettes*, *Earth Pathways*, *A Writer in Morocco*, and more. Their craft essay about disability representation in fiction features in *Human/Kind Press'* anthology *Musing the Margins*. They are the English Language Editor for *Angeprangert!* and a staff reader at *Prismatica Magazine*. They run *A Wave in the Heart: Poetic Connection*, a mindful writing workshop that encourages people to explore and develop a connection with Self through creativity.

As a pansexual, genderqueer and disabled writer, they hope their work offers readers an inclusive perspective. Will read your tarot for a price.

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