*No Man*

*A Novel*

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**For Sheena, of Course.**

*Chapter 1: Death*

“There’s a child in there!”

A crowd ebbed and flowed around the remains of the accident, first emboldened to move towards the fire but then quickly repulsed, faces reddened, flesh tightening in an instant. In the back seat of the car a boy sat strapped in, with one small hand pressed flat against the glass of the window, becoming a silhouette against trembling scarlet flames. Even through the darkening smoke some of the crowd had seen that the back of the child’s head was oozing thick pink jelly. Yet before all visibility was lost, still they saw the child move.

The shouts of the gathering mob became drowned by the increasing roar of the inferno, and still audible within all of that, a constant thin scream.

The driver of the burning car, pulled out by some anonymous hero, sat propped up against a shop front like a broken doll. She stared into the wreckage of her vehicle and although her mouth moved ceaselessly, there were no words. Through the knot of onlookers, one man moved incessantly, taking hold of onlookers, one after another, pleading. No-one wanted to meet his gaze, the crowd parted wherever he arrived. Those he did manage to capture turned quickly out of his grasp to move purposefully away.

Finally, the man became still. Through the blackening glass of the car’s window, he believed he could see the child’s skin char before all visibility was mercifully extinguished by the black clouds that boiled out of the vehicle. Then, in the far distance there was the jarring discordancy of sirens, whilst nearby someone had eventually found a fire extinguisher which they used to pour guttering clouds of sparkling ice into the insatiable heat.

In the weeks that followed, the boy never recovered consciousness. Nurses tended to his burns while he lived and they all agreed, whenever they came to speak together, that the very worst of it was when they had to peel away the dressings around the child’s face to reveal the unblinking, accusatory stare. His eyelids were burnt away.

*Chapter 2: The Island*

In the summer the island was home to the management and employees of *Island Quest Ltd.*, a company which hosted visiting groups of adolescents, promising them adventure away from home. For the young visitors, it was an opportunity to climb rock faces and abseil back down; to kayak with seals and otters in the inconstant northern sunshine; to live for a week or two in one of the few places in Britain which could still claim to be wilderness. Most came with their schools; a few travelled alone. Some returned year after year; others departed delighted to return home to comfortable beds and familiar meals. For fewer still, a love for a certain life of exploration was ignited: two brothers who visited the island grew up to become mountaineers. One of those young men disappeared in the Andes in 2012 igniting a controversy that darkened and soured with the passing of the years, mired in speculation that poisoned the meagre facts. Another boy had been packed off to the island by parents who wanted to set their son on a different, better, path after increasingly out-of-control behavior but their hopes came to nothing and the boy would one day gain a terrible notoriety. One girl became a sailor after her visit and eventually she represented her country in the London Olympics, winning a bronze medal to cause a minor ripple of national jubilation. When she had stood on the Olympic rostrum and watched the flag of her nation curl in the breeze, one of the many images conjured was a fleeting memory of learning to helm a small sailing boat in the waters around the island, the sunlight sparking tiny jewels of light in the clear blue sea.

In the autumn, as the skies began to swell with grey clouds and the sea-waves devolved from rolling hillocks into jagged spikes, fewer clients arrived and the indigenous animals crept closer to the buildings to reclaim ancestral spaces. Deer could swim from one island to other land close by when the weather was calm; an observer might be treated, on some still evenings, to the startling sight of a massive antlered head cresting above the ocean as the animals strained, wide-eyed and snorting clouds of sea-water, desperate for shore. Once landed, the bucks often stood awhile, perhaps watching human activity on the depopulating island with a wary aloofness before sauntering away. Birds flocked ever closer to the timber-clad chalet, set back from a pebble beach, that formed the solitary structure on the island. As winter approached and the influence of humanity thinned, all the other creatures of this world began to gather in once more.

At last the final groups of adventurers were waved off and the working year was finished. For a further week or two the buildings were secured against the winter to come by the last remaining employees, in turn getting everything ready for the caretakers who were on their way. The incoming team would be responsible for carrying out emergency repairs: replacing roofing ripped away, clearing up when the rains got in, as rain always would. There was also some ecological tracking but that wasn’t of more than passing interest to the staff of *Island Quest* who were looking forward to their own seasonal challenges – some going to the European ski resorts, a couple off to the tropics to go diving, others returning early to families for Christmas, hoping to pick up work in a bar or restaurant. They enjoyed final nights drinking and reminiscing in their rooms as autumn played out.

When the last day arrived, for a time at least the cacophony of humanity was mostly silenced.

Fishing the waters around the island, locals kept their distance. There were some wild stories about the island, told in pubs during long lock-ins or legends related by grandfathers, or schoolmates around camp fires. These stories were old and although the time between retellings could sometimes be measured in generations, they endured.

Those who lived around the coasts would want to tell casual visitors that such talk signified nothing, was only local colour repeated for the benefit of tourists young and old. For the pragmatic locals, the island was just rock laid down beneath archaic oceans, returned to the surface in unwitnessed upheavals, with traces gouged by ancient ice-sheets creeping inch by century-spanning inch across the surface of our world. Now the island was surrounded by the unforgiving Atlantic Ocean, barely clothed in a thin soil, a permanent home only to birds, small burrowing creatures and the ubiquitous Scottish midge. Since men, and the ancestors of men, had lived and died in caves the island was fundamentally unchanged. Without constant repair and replacement, all the trappings of man would decay and disappear in the space of a few short decades. The island would once again become what it had been when the glaciers had retreated. The almost indecent haste to slough off the influence of man at season’s end merely demonstrated that in the Hebridean islands humankind was an incomer, tolerated as a diverting entertainment, perhaps, but tolerated all the same, never welcomed. For whatever reasons, the locals kept their distance. After all, there was no particular need for a fisherman to make landfall. There was nothing out of the ordinary to see; no rare or unusual animals, no natural features impressive enough to pose a challenge to grown-up adventurers, no views which could not be bettered in more accessible places. In winter evenings of freezing seas and sharp mists, it was easy to imagine that the island could slip almost forgotten from creation.

Archie Dougal and John McKay had been fishing the waters for more than eighty years between them. They didn’t shun the island – far from it, they motored in as close as they could, placing and pulling up their lobster pots from around the rocky lips of the land – and they had set foot on it as well, too many times to remember, to collect damaged pots, to investigate debris, or simply because landfall was a tacit right, established by their forefathers. Archie and John relished the chance to retell the old stories whenever they could. On evenings in the pub, when the air was hot and thick with the smoke of the fire, they would pass on their tales to those few tourists who passed by.

So Archie paused for a moment on the deck of their craft and watched far-away figures in garishly bright outdoor clothes bustle about, the party packing up *Island Quest* for the winter forming a human chain to pass bundles and boxes down to the hand-built jetty where the island’s supply boat bobbed in the waves. When the time came for the employees to enjoy their Christmas dinners and the welcoming-in of the New Year with whisky and good cheer, the island would brood almost alone in the freezing Atlantic, left to its own unfathomable passions. Removed, for the moment, from the weight of mankind’s consensual memory, what might be awakened for its own brief moment in the brittle winter sun? Archie didn’t believe in spirits and fiends of the deep but nor would he be willing to stay on the island, alone, to watch the sun settle into the sea while the day’s end raced towards him across the waters. In the dark mouth of the island’s cave a deep memory lurked, lazily circling Archie’s consciousness, never close enough to become clear.

After a while Archie bent again to his many tasks, already looking forward to returning with the day’s catch, and then to a beer. Meanwhile on the island the steady process of securing the buildings for the winter continued.

Archie straightened up again to wave at John, who was waiting by the boat’s steering wheel. John gunned the engine and they rose smoothly into the waves.

“It is a good catch?” John mouthed over the noise of the engine and the rushing water. Archie put up a thumb to indicate *Yes*, it had been a good day.

The island heaved itself out of the sea like a humpbacked whale, a ridge of dark stone dappled with shadows shifting in the light reflected on waves, garlanded by seabirds circling in tightening spirals. Heather and tough grasses the deep purple and burnt umber of old bruises smeared themselves across ashen-grey rock. The land writhed in the unstable shafts of sunlight breaking through the clouds, while on the beaches, breaking waves caused pebbles to whisper in an urgent echo of the birds that flocked above. In summer the island stomached its visitors, and in the winter, it slept and dreamed alone.

Against the coast, the seabirds wheeled and shrieked without ceasing. The noise they made seemed to emerge out of the air and water itself. They could have been crying out in a harsh and archaic language: “*Tekel-li*”, repeated without cease, echoing across the fastness.

The island sloped gently down into the sea at its southern shore, where the main structures sat, then rose up sharply. On the far side the rock fell away in an abrupt cliff, lending the land an asymmetric twist. Within the encroaching darkness of the evening was hidden a deep cavern in the northern cliff. Archie thought about the bay, hidden on the seaward side and of the cave which had provided, so local legend insisted, some small measure of shelter for long-ago seafarers *in extremis*.

The boat tore across the waves, throwing a fine mist of sea-water into the air. Ozone and sea salt mingled in an odour harsh enough to sting. It was a smell Archie associated with the sea, of course, but also, in a darker and richer manifestation, with the caves, although when he had last set foot in them, thirty years before, there had been another mingled scent, part rot and part made up of promises forged in bone, sealed in blood. When he told his tales in front of open pub fires, Archie remembered that time in the caverns of the island, when the day was crumbling into night.

*Chapter 3: Mike*

Later, when Mike had been on the island for weeks and all of his previous life was taking on the transient, unreal quality of fragmented dream, the details of his journey from London only re-surfaced rarely, like flotsam carried on the rising tide.

Mike had boarded the train in London carrying virtually all that he owned in a borrowed hold-all. He had squeezed into a window seat, hoping that no-one would arrive to share the table with him, knowing that he was going to be disappointed as the train quickly filled. Outside the carriage window the business of the station went on, parts mechanical and human moving in intricate patterns together.

Eventually, Mike had been joined at the table. A small family clattered into the seats around him – a mother travelling with her daughter and son. As the various components necessary to prepare for a child’s long journey were spread over the table, the mum glanced over at Mike with barely disguised suspicion. He couldn’t blame her. Through her eyes he must have appeared only a few steps from derelict, stubble already sprouting into an unruly beard, eyes red-rimmed with sleepless nights, clothes faded pastel with age and already subtly unfit for the time of year. He felt hostility rolling from the woman, a warning to him that she was watching out for her precious cubs, that he had better behave himself during their long trip together. Mike had turned away and pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the window, the vibrations of the train’s idling engines resonating deep in his skull. In the imperfect reflection, Mike’s face was like stone, with deep furrows running across his forehead and down his neck, cutting his face into sharp angles.

Other passengers had continued to pour into the carriage: elderly couples with sandwiches and thermos flasks of tea; more families, dragging bags and suitcases; groups of loud men on their way to a football match. Almost before the fans got themselves settled, they opened cans so that the smell of beer was soon hanging in the air as tangibly as mist. The level of noise continued to rise and from the corner of his vision, Mike had seen the mother stretch out a calming hand over the table to her daughter who sat in the seat next to him. Opposite, the boy was plugged into an electronic game, presumably oblivious to the life carrying on in the rest of the carriage. Mike had enjoyed such games himself, not so long ago, but now the thought of them made his stomach flop and his head spin, for no reason he could easily identify. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the sports fans, the families and the old folks in pairs like socks.

The train moved away, leaving behind first the station, daubed in colours bright enough to be luminous; then the suburbs, less defined as they darkened in the deepening twilight. Mike’s travelling companions fell to their own ways of passing the time. Mike must have been rocked into an imperfect sleep because he began to dream and it was this that, much later on, he could remember more clearly than anything else, as if all that occurred from when he had first learnt about the island until the end was nothing more than a dream within a dream.

In his reverie, Michael Warner, known as Mike to the friends he used to have, had shrunk to being just a point in space, a mere viewpoint without physical body. From that singularity he swam on a foam of memories, and memories of memory. In the way of nightmares, Mike suddenly found himself driving, the rattling of the train becoming the steady slap of tyres upon asphalt. The darkness was the apotheosis of all the darkness of the waking world, the ideal form of the fractured dusk that deepened in the world outside of his skull. Two journeys, then: in his sleep, speeding inexorably towards an unbearable destination; in the waking world the train rattling from the uninvited past into the unknowable future. The dream-road was as black as long-spilt oil, and Mike was pleased that there would be no streetlamps on this road, as he did not wish to see what lay on either side. Even so, he knew that what waited at the end would need no further illumination. It would be burning. He wanted to call out, but all that he could produce was a thin hiss, as if his chest was squeezed between two unyielding hands, and try as he might, no words would come.

Whenever he thought about his final train trip, the memory was interrupted by one even earlier. When his counsellor had mentioned the island for the first time, it had hardly registered with Mike at all. It simply seemed to be an idea too preposterous to warrant any serious consideration. Only later, as he came to think more carefully about the possibilities it offered, did he vaguely recall the circumstances of that first comment. His counsellor, rotund and indefatigably cheerful went by the slightly unlikely name of Nanette (Mike couldn’t recall having met a single other person with that name in all of his life). Nanette was outsized in every way, from her massive girth to her giant personality, although Mike always suspected a vulnerable core. Nanette had managed to reach him when he was in an unplumbed place and he was grateful for that.

Despite Mike’s lack of interest – or perhaps because of it - Nanette repeatedly returned to the theme of the island, until Mike not only heard what she said but actually listened as well. She knew the value of persistence. One conversation in particular remained diamond-sharp in the fog of his later recollections.

“Have you thought any more about the island?” Nanette had asked him.

“I’ve thought about it,” Mike told her carefully.

“And…?”

“I think it might be just what I need. It might…help.” He had been casting about for another word, but *help* seemed a fitting choice. “I’ve thought about it a lot, in fact.”

Nanette had looked pleased. “So tell me exactly what you’re thinking. Tell me how you think it might *help*.”

Mike had taken a deep breath. “I’m thinking that it sounds like a great idea on the one hand but on the other hand - I might end up feeling like I’m running away. I’m also thinking that the highlands and islands of Scotland sound pretty wonderful but might turn out to be lonely. Being in a place where there’s just me and my own thoughts might not be such a great idea?” It had meant to be a statement but had emerged as a question.

“Do you need someone else to make the decision for you?” She had looked at him gravely.

Mike had been genuinely surprised. *Was* that what he secretly wanted?

“Just thinking that it might not be such a great idea. Being away from…” Mike had spread his arms, meaning to encompass the wider world, but realising too late that the gesture really only included the two of them in Nanette’s tiny room.

“And why do you say *that* might not be such a good idea?”

Mike had to think. Perhaps Nanette had been leading him to this point: sooner or later (*sooner*, an interior voice whispered slyly) his sessions with Nanette would come to an end. When that time came there would be no one left to talk with anyway. The whole idea of the island might be the counsellor’s idea for a trial run, a sort of controlled experiment before Mike stepped back into the reality defined by the rest of the world.

Nanette said nothing; not that this was unusual as she often went for most of the session without saying much at all, simply urging him to speak with a slow blink of the eyes, an inclination of the head, an opening and closing of plump fingers. This time, though, Mike thought that he detected something more encouraging. He thought he saw the ghost of a smile.

It had been what Nanette described as being a ‘sort-of’ job opportunity: an island in the Hebrides, used as an outdoor adventure centre, was recruiting people to spend the winter months there. This was essentially house-sitting, she explained, making sure that the elements didn’t get in, carrying out some basic repairs, that sort of thing. The caretakers would also carry out some ecological surveys for the Scottish assembly: investigating how much plastic washed up on beaches, for example. The idea had germinated slowly in Mike’s mind: he didn’t mind roughing it a bit, but it sounded…well, boring. But then, at some point he surprised himself by discovering that he had decided to make the application, just as she had suggested. He would take on the role of winter caretaker, collector of eco-information, or whatever it turned out to be, and he would do a good job. If the people with him ever needed some guidance, he would help them too, and he would hope that they would accept him at face value, rather than know him as…what he was.

All that Mike remembered later was that as the train rushed northwards he began to feel a little of what weighed upon him carried away in the slipstream. He had closed his eyes again, and this time, he did not dream at all before awakening to find himself arrived in Glasgow, grey in the brightness of the morning.

*Chapter 4: Eleanor*

Eleanor had come to the hotel hours before the time she and the others were due to be meeting with the island’s owner. She stood outside and peered in through the enormous windows. Inside, in what was obviously the lounge, slightly uncomfortable-looking armchairs in faded russet leather were arranged in semi-circles, the room devoid of customers. Further in, yellowing illumination from the wall-mounted lights failed to penetrate far into the corners of the huge room. It looked like her imaginings of a Victorian gentleman’s club, past its best days. She caught sight of her reflection in the glass, a translucent apparition embedded awkwardly in the gloomy interior. Her ghost was well wrapped up against the cold, but her own familiar features peered out from under a hood, fresh features for someone in middle age, she told herself. There was nothing remarkable in the reflection she saw: maybe it was a tad shorter than average, hair perhaps tinged with more grey than would be likely for most women of her age. She wondered when exactly she had become so unremarkable and decided that she had probably been born that way. The mass of humanity would pass her by without a second thought: *Nothing to see here, move along*. Eleanor examined her reflection for a moment or two longer, then put all other thoughts aside with a familiar, efficient mental shrug. She drew her coat around her more tightly and steeled herself to walk up the wide steps to the double doors at the building’s entrance.

“Real life,” Eleanor whispered to herself as she entered the hotel.

Eleanor only had to wait for a moment at the reception desk. A young man, a handful of years past boyhood, appeared almost immediately asking if he could help.

“I’m here to meet Mr. Haigh,” she declared.

“We’re expecting you – you’re the first,” the boy replied, and Eleanor found herself ushered into the lounge she had been looking into a short time before. *This is a better class of hotel*, Eleanor almost spoke aloud. Better than she was used to, at any rate, although she would have been the first to admit that was not to say much. She ordered a coffee, which silently appeared at her side before she had even settled herself.

Hands cupped around the newly arrived drink, her thoughts began to drift. Immediately after the redundancy, she had imagined that being a lady of leisure would be one of the compensations of not having a job. People might show the same sort of regard as for an actress between roles. The reality proved rather different, she soon found. When people looked at her (*if people looked at her*, she corrected herself) they were not imagining her as something exotic and exciting: they were seeing a rather lonely middle-aged spinster, with a future every bit as uneventful as her past.

In the end, Eleanor’s job had defined her more than she would ever have believed. She had found that being without employment had almost excised the core of her character, a fact she recognized with a stupefying mixture of surprise and horror. She supposed that after all those years looking after her mother – at first merely a cantankerous old lady but becoming needy and venomous as dementia crept in by barely noticeable increments – and then with her mother’s liberating death, her job as a minor civil servant really *had* become a large part of who she was. Losing her job brought, if not the loss of bereavement exactly, then something very like it.

Now here she was, sitting in the grand lounge of an empty hotel, in a cold town on the edge of all the world she had ever known. She would meet Mr Haigh, who was almost certain to be nothing like she imagined him to be. He would tell her how she would be spending perhaps the most uncomfortable few months of her life with a group of other misfits. She had to take a deep breath, recognising the first stirrings of panic.

“No more,” she breathed. It would be an adventure exactly as promised by *Island Quest Ltd*. in their promotional literature, and she would discover hitherto unsuspected talents in her two jobs: as a winter caretaker and as a recorder of environmental data, helping to save the planet in some important way she couldn’t as yet quite detail. She sat up a little in her armchair to have a look around. Three times higher than in a normal room, the ceiling was almost invisible, whilst the windows framed a view of the empty main street and the grey seas beyond, clutching at the shore. Curtains sagged, the material further weighed down with fringes of braid, originally gold but now bronzed with age. Everything around her exuded a solidity alien to Eleanor, whose own accommodation had been almost entirely filled with self-construction flatpacks which leaned and rocked precariously even when newly made.

Outside, the sky mirrored the sea in its turbulence. A seagull swooped down to land in the road. The bird seemed immense to Eleanor, the largest such creature she had ever seen. It looked to be a veteran of countless avian battles, strutting as if proclaiming that it had always been the victor. It swaggered on the tarmac for a while then suddenly stopped, cocking its head. From the roadway it fixed Eleanor with its eye, a point of coal black within a ring of pale blue, as deliberately as if it had been looking for her specifically. Its beak was startlingly yellow, rimmed blood-red, with the tip curled in a hook giving the bird a permanent scowl. That rough hooked beak would tear its prey as viciously as a rusty scimitar and rip out ragged wounds, Eleanor thought. She was pleased to be indoors, even more so when a gust of wind made the gull stagger and stretch out its prodigious wings for balance, as if the creature grasped at the air itself.

The bird kept its gaze upon Eleanor just long enough for that to become uncomfortable, and then it set off walking again, probing here and there for leavings of picnic lunches or discarded fish suppers – food that would be hard come by now that the changing seasons had emptied the town. Back home in Hampshire, Eleanor reflected, which she had left a bare forty-eight hours previously, the dog days of summer were not yet quite ended. Yet here winter was already on the horizon, autumn itself dissolved by the difference of a few hundred miles. As she ruminated, the seagull launched itself ponderously into the air and was gone.

“Would there be anything else madam?” The young man appeared at her side and made her jump.

“No. Thank you. I’m…” She waved a hand to finish off the sentence with a gesture which could have a multitude of meanings.

“Well, if you need anything else, just ring the bell on the Reception desk,” the young man said before melting back into the depths of the building. Eleanor took a sip of the cooling coffee, determined to make it last, and took an age to unwrap the tiny biscuit that came with it, so thin and delicate that it could have come from a doll’s house.

At last she was aware that the light was shifting, that quite a bit of time must have passed. Tiring of simply sitting, she decided to get herself another coffee after all. It would also give her a chance to chat with the waiter, see if she could elicit any more information about Bramley Haigh, or *Island Quest*, or find out if he knew anything about the island itself – such as how remote it really was? Did the employees sometimes make it into the town for a drink? Did they perhaps come to this very hotel? She thought probably not, considering the price of the coffee. Eleanor’s grasp of the geography of the area – of geography in general - was woefully insecure, so she had no idea how far away the island was, nor how easy her onward journey would be. In her mind, the various locations and stops that had made up her trek northwards were like the uniform dots on the London Underground map, precisely spaced distances which bore scant relationship to the actual world.

Eleanor went over to the Reception. She peered around to see if the young man was anywhere to be seen, and then, on finding that he wasn’t, she brought her palm down on the desk bell.

“So sorry,” she said to the barman when he appeared, although she wasn’t quite sure why she found herself apologising.

“Quite alright. Another coffee?”

“Please. When you’re ready,” Eleanor said and immediately felt a little foolish – he wasn’t exactly rushed off his feet, was he?

In Eleanor’s local Job Centre, Freya was one of the staff who worked with the unemployed to help with searches and applications. Freya had befriended Eleanor, which came a bit of a surprise to both of them, except to confirm the old adage that opposites attract. Possibly Freya saw a project in the making but at the time the friendship had seemed genuine although Eleanor was self-aware enough to understand that her new friend had needs of her own, not least a deep-seated need to be needed. One day Eleanor was greeted by Freya, waving a print-out and wide-eyed with excitement. She had found what she described as a *great opportunity*, which would involve Eleanor spending the winter looking after an outdoor adventure centre and collecting environmental data. Eleanor had not immediately warmed to the idea – the very fact that it was a centre for *adventure* worried her – what did *she* know about adventure in any form? Yet Freya had managed to talk Eleanor around. She would be part of a team, Freya explained patiently, and the other members of that team would most likely be students – not much older than children themselves in all probability, and they would need someone there to look after them. It was a blatant appeal to Eleanor’s predilections, and it shouldn’t have worked, but it *did*, just as Freya must have guessed it would. As for collecting data about what washed up on the shore, Eleanor thought that sounded pretty straightforward, even began to seem crazily apposite, exactly what she needed, coming at precisely the right time. Eleanor had never asked Freya where the information about this off-beat job opportunity had come from, nor why Freya had been quite so keen on the idea. But now she was here, the enormity of the choice was stark, and Eleanor wondered anew how happy she would be in such a place.

“Your coffee.” A second cup was slid onto her table, with another tiny biscuit sat upon a second bill. Eleanor sipped at her drink and turned back to looking out of the window.

The gull she had seen before had returned to stride up the centre of the road – but could she be *sure* it was the same animal? Eleanor had no doubt that it was. She imagined that from time to time it paused to look across at her, as if in challenge. She heard the cawing of other seabirds, even through the thick glass of the hotel windows, but the great bird – she was beginning to think of him as a princeling among gull-kind – never made a response. The bird was startlingly white in contrast to the darkness inside the hotel. The bird fixed her with its unblinking stare again, and Eleanor could not help but think how it would feel to be trapped by those talons when that cruel beak stabbed down, when those black eyes were the last thing that you saw.

*Chapter 5: Alex*

Alex’s journey started horribly, got worse, and threatened to finish in his idea of Hell. All of the varying modes of transport taking him to his final destination seemed to have a malignant intent to cause him maximum discomfort but the coach struck him as being certainly the worst. His legs were accordioned against the back of the seat in front, occupied by an inconsiderate gentleman of uncommon size whose every wriggle threatened to dislocate one of Alex’s bony knees. Alex had made for a seat at the back, thinking that this would be relatively peaceful and provide an opportunity to let him get on with his work, but that had been an error – the back seat didn’t recline, and he found himself enfolded when the seat in front snapped back. Worse still, the toilet was also located at the back of the bus, attracting a steady parade of passengers staggering down the aisle. Then one such traveller managed to jam the lock so that the door couldn’t be closed, leaving it swinging to and fro, wafting increasingly foul odours. The air-conditioning and heating seemed to be locked into a sequence which saw the temperature first teeth-chatteringly cold and then rapidly rise, missing comfortably warm entirely in the quantum jump to being unbearably hot, before cycling through the extremes again. Not for the first time on his journey, Alex found himself questioning his own judgement in buying a super-cheap bus ticket. Worse still, he was struggling to find pattern in the journey – the vehicle seemed to brake and accelerate unpredictably, producing a chaotic graphical picture which Alex saw as being mostly muddy brown. His least favourite colour.

The story of how he’d ended up on a coach to the Scottish highlands was more than a little hazy. Alex liked things to progress in logical, causal steps: in bright, clear colours. Yet suddenly no part of the story seemed to make sense to him. He was a city boy who loved gadgets: so he was going to spend months on a no-frills Scottish island where even the supply of electricity was hard to come by? He worked exclusively with his nimble mathematical mind – he had never done a day’s manual labour in his life: so he was going to join a detail tasked with patching up an outdoor pursuit centre, surely guaranteeing at least a modicum of heavy physical work? Alex liked his own company, so much so that he wasn’t quite sure if the girl he had lived with, on and off (definitely off now) had ever really been his girlfriend in the fullest meaning of the term. Yet, even so, he was going to be sharing this island – this otherwise deserted island, he reminded himself - with complete strangers. Almost more than anything else, he hated making small talk with strangers. They always asked him about his work, and no matter how hard he tried to explain it in simple terms, no-one ever really understood. That made him impatient and filled him with an incandescent sense of impotence, both for himself and on behalf of those who struggled to understand him. That made his opinion of his own work become increasingly grey and sludgy, like watching ink drop into a glass of water and seeing the contamination spread ineluctably. His growing anger about the man sitting in front of him added another uncomfortable splash of vivid puce to an already unpalatable mix.

Alex opened out his laptop again, the machine jammed uncomfortably between his ribs and the wobbling back of the seat in front, reclined so that the human whale could enjoy a fitful sleep. The computer whirred into life, and Alex’s program popped up, the one he had promised he would be working on when he was away, the extraordinary piece of software which was going to make him rich and famous, and ensure that Sophie, his never-quite-girlfriend, was sorry that she had dumped him. He allowed himself a brief glimpse of that satisfying picture of the future, and then the numbers were in his head again, soothing and silver-grey so that everything else – the fluctuating temperature; the smell; the fat bastard sat in front, his one-time girlfriend – all faded, ghosts and irrelevancies. His fingers danced across the keyboard, code flowing out across the screen as fast as it could be typed. In his mind’s eye delicate and beautiful constructs flowered, turning and twisting in intricate eddies of interlacing reason. Alex often didn’t understand much about other people, what made them happy or sad, or what he should say to them, but he was quite correct when it came to analysing the reaction non-specialists had to his work. So refined was his project that very few even amongst fellow mathematicians could properly understand how it was pieced together. It rarely occurred to Alex to try to simplify his explanations even though, if he was ever going to attract the sort of funding which would make his dreams come true, he would have to find a way. However, that job could always be put off for another time, with today given over to the numbers, comforting in their abstraction, beautiful in their austerity.

A few months earlier, Alex had sat with Harry Klein, his supervisor, in one of the coffee bars on campus. They had bought coffees and gone to sit out on the terrace. Other students lounged about, some chatting in groups, others sitting alone, mostly reading. Customers looking like toddlers on a staircase, perched on the huge stone blocks that formed giant-sized steps down to the main plaza.

The cafe had a triangular footprint which pleased Alex: the *fit* of the geometry rarely failed to pacify him. It seemed impossible to him that others could not see the sheer *rightness* of the design. In Alex’s mind, the idea of rightness itself was the lightest blue, the exact same shade as an obviously correct equation. Klein settled down opposite Alex and tried to catch and keep his student’s gaze.

“You need to think about how to market the program.” Klein returned to a well-worn theme.

Alex had nodded enthusiastically, but his mind was filled with calculations – it was a good day, the numbers were falling over themselves to make sense to him, equations and formulae flowing together and splitting apart again in an organic dance. To watch the figures at play was to luxuriate inside a multi-coloured waterfall. Alex had learnt not to ignore the possibilities of a good day, the sort of days when problems solved themselves.

“You need to be thinking about this *now*,” Professor Klein had said eventually. The older man was well aware of when he had his student’s attention, and when it was elsewhere. Alex felt the numbers lose some of their brightness, the previously dynamic flow in his mind become sluggish. He forced himself to concentrate on the here-and-now.

“I get it,” he had replied.

“I’m not sure you do, not entirely,” Klein said, not unkindly, looking over his cup. “You say you get it, maybe you even believe you do, but I’m not so sure, Alex. The program works – you’ve some work to do, but the numbers are basically sound. We know that it can be made into marketable products with dozens of applications in science, business, the arts…we know all that. What I’m worried about now is that you’ll miss out on getting all of this by simply not selling the thing properly. Wait long enough and someone else will develop something similar – most likely not as good – but *they* will get the backing and you won’t. Someone else will end up being the one remembered for what *you* have achieved.”

Alex found something vaguely irritating, even demeaning, about an academic like Klein suddenly channelling a business guru. Alex and his supervisor had worked together on the mathematics, sometimes operating like two halves of a single mind to build something magical, with the tantalising prospect of changing the way the world saw itself. Now, all of a sudden, Klein was sounding more like an accountant.

“So, what do you think we can do?”

“It’s what I think *you* can do,” Klein had replied, and had gone on to outline an idea which had, directly or indirectly led to him being on a series of buses, from Exeter to London, from London to Glasgow and the third and final leg yet to come, from Glasgow out to Oban, more-or-less where he was due to meet with the others, members of the group Klein had christened the Swiss Family Robinson. Then the headman of this company, *Island Quest* (Alex appreciated the fact that the company name described exactly what it did) would whisk them all away to their winter home. Had Klein found this decidedly odd gig for Alex? Or had it been Sophie, in a final act of pre-separation kindness – support *post mortem*, as it were? Or had Alex actually got round to organizing it for himself? Alex was unsure. Up until recently, his life had been like thick rope – individual strands had wound around each other, but never really intersected. Sophie had existed on one of those parallel strands: she was *the girlfriend*; Klein and the university work were *the program;* there were others, including one which he had once called *study drugs and stimulants*, but which he was increasingly coming to consider under a more sober title: *drug problem*. Every so often, Alex had quiet times – there had been some such times as he had been sitting in the coach on this long journey – and the activity of the numbers lessened enough for him to examine these usually separate strands in his life with greater clarity. Those different aspects had seemed to bleed into each other over the past few months: *the girlfriend* had started complaining about the time he spent on *the program;* Klein had made a few comments about how the program was slowing down, and although he didn’t mention it as such, there was something in the way Klein was talking that made Alex think: *he believes I have a drug problem.* As the strands of his life unwound, they simultaneously began to thin and fray, which was when the notion of going away first started to sound attractive. Just in the way that numbers and equations gave shape and colour to otherwise formless ideas in Alex’s head, so the notion of getting away firmed into a specific time and place, someone somehow sourced the job on the island and the idea became a plan, and the plan turned into a reality. Klein had told Alex that it would be an opportunity to put the finishing touches to the program itself but more importantly than that, it would give an opportunity to prepare some presentations that would help to sell the idea. Alex had gradually come to think that this was something he could do. He just lacked the sort of Rosetta stone which was needed to unlock a translation between the ideas inside his head and communicating those concepts to others.

Alex glanced out of the window and saw that they were coming into Glasgow: the second stage of his journey was nearly over, and he would soon find himself committed to winter on the island. He closed the program on his laptop, feeling, as he invariably did, the smallest echo of a sense of loss as the screen blanked out. In his wildest imaginings, he saw a time when billions across the planet would feel the same way when his programs shut down. They would all remember Alex Hudson for the boon he had granted to the modern age.

*Chapter 6: The meeting*

Mike had taken a taxi from the station to the hotel and as he paid the fare he reminded himself not to offer too large a tip. Throwing in a couple of extra quid left his net worth in double digits, not nearly enough for a ticket back to London. Even so, leaving a tip at all was an affirmation that his affairs had turned a corner. As the taxi drove away he looked up at the frontage of the hotel. Through the huge windows, enclosed by swathes of curtains like lapping tongues, he saw a woman, watching the road from one of the wing-backed leather chairs. Mike would have guessed that she was one of their party even if she hadn’t been the only person there. Even from a distance, he could sense the air of expectation and apprehension which surrounded her in an almost tangible cloud. He resisted an urge to wave cheerily realising that he was light-headed with a sense of liberation.

From inside Eleanor saw a man getting out of a taxi but tried hard to avoid studying him too closely. He was almost certainly one of the other members of the group. She hesitated, then the proper moment for a sign of recognition was lost. The traveller snatched up a large hold-all and climbed the steps to the front door, entered the lobby and approached the Reception desk. The young man who seemed to run the place appeared again.

“I’m here to meet with Mr. Haigh,” Mike announced.

Mike was asked if he would like a drink while he waited. Eleanor, listening intently to these conversational scraps, felt a thrill of possibilities; meeting new people, crafting a fresh persona, one her mother wouldn’t recognise. As Mike came into the lounge, Eleanor got up and intercepted him, holding out a hand as she made her approach.

“Hi, my name’s Eleanor Jackson. I’m here to see Bramley Haigh as well.”

“I’m Mike. Good to meet you Eleanor,” he said and shook her hand. He gave a smile at odds with his appearance. He was more dishevelled than could be explained solely by a long journey. Yet the practised smile also spoke of confidence, success, even a dash of arrogance – Eleanor promised herself that, given the luxury of weeks of close confinement to come, she would uncover Mike’s story, get to peer beneath his mask.

“Did you have a good journey?” she asked.

“As good as can be expected,” Mike replied, with a second smile reaching almost as far as his eyes. He was handsome, Eleanor decided, a sense of being marked by the trials of life only adding to the attraction. The two of them fell to superficial conversation, talking about the weather, and about all manner of things which avoided the question they both most wanted to ask: *What brings you here, what has happened so that you want to spend winter with strangers, on a speck in the ocean?* For Mike, it was a simple case of propriety – it was too intrusive a question for the first meeting. For Eleanor, the reasoning was more subtle – she wanted to revel for a while in the act of detection. Mike’s small talk was as practised as his smile, so efficient that Eleanor felt able to detach herself from the exchange and allow herself a daydream. She wondered what it would be like to come back from the island, a few months hence, with a new friend. A man like Mike, just for the sake of example. Someone who had the ease of a man-about-town, who would go out to work doing important things, but who would need their rare lapses of confidence soothing away. She realized that Mike had addressed some remark to her but she had no idea what it might have been.

“Sorry?”

“I think another castaway has just arrived,” Mike inclined his head towards a lean young man just struggling in through the doors, multiple bags swinging from around his neck and arms with such force that they threatened to tip him over. “Perhaps I ought to go and help – he doesn’t look to be travelling light.” Mike went over and introduced himself. After briefly checking in with the receptionist and the inevitable offer of coffee, Mike escorted the new-comer over to where Eleanor sat. She rose to shake his hand.

“Eleanor, this is Alex. Alex, Eleanor.” Eleanor kept her hand extended and Alex looked at it for just a moment or two longer than was entirely comfortable. Then he took her hand and shook it enthusiastically.

They all settled into their seats and Alex launched into the background story he had rehearsed as he had travelled. “I’m here to get my doctorate done. I was hoping for some really quiet time to put the finishing touches to it, get some presentations together to help me sell my ideas. You won’t be disturbed by me, I promise.” He grinned. Then, a memory surfaced, cresting his consciousness like a bubble: at School one of the teaching assistants had been given the job of helping the young Alex – not with his academic work, which was almost scarily good, but with his social interactions, decidedly progressing less happily. The lady in question was Mrs Neville who had done more than anyone to change the course of Alex’s life, which had often been lonely and full of unanticipated sadness. She had given him a rule about meetings, especially first meetings: tell other people what you want them to know about you – but then make sure you ask about *them*, because, above anything else, most people like to talk about themselves. Alex could understand that simple rule and he had always tried to follow it. “What about you?” he asked, looking quickly from one to the other. Mrs Neville would be proud. Alex relaxed; now he could switch off a bit, enjoy some uninterrupted time to watch the interplay of numbers in his head.

But they didn’t start to talk about themselves. The woman leant forward so far in her chair so that her knees almost touched Alex’s, making him struggle not to back away. Instead of talking about herself, she questioned him again, with eyes wide and shiny. “What exactly are you studying, Alex? What is your doctorate about?”

It was the one question which never failed to unsettle Alex, as it seemed the most intensely personal thing which could be asked of him, whilst the answers seemed guaranteed to make others lose interest. The normally garrulous Mrs Neville remained silent in Alex’s mind, offering no advice. He took a deep breath.

“I am working on a mathematical model which recognizes patterns in data. It uses some transformational techniques….” He could see that he was losing them already, before even getting close to the truly technical parts of his explanation. He decided to try a different tack. “For example, I can reproduce the model as computer code which enables me to reconstruct pictures from seriously damaged originals.” The other two looked politely underwhelmed. He felt a familiar aching start to scramble in his chest and fought to stop it from blossoming into full-blown panic. Words, sticky as half-melted chocolate, lodged in his throat. He would try again.

“The program finds order in what seems like chaos. It recognises faces in crowds, it can distinguish messages from background noise, it can solve encryptions...”

The other man - Mike - looked suddenly more animated. “OK, I know about face-recognition software and I’ve got a bit of an idea about code-breaking – but you’re saying that the program you’re developing can do *all* these things at once – it can recognise patterns or even tell you whether there really *is* a pattern in a set of data?”

Alex beamed. “Exactly, although more than that, it not only tells you that *something* is there, it can tell you *what* is there. It genuinely learns.”

Eleanor smiled uneasily.

“And can it find patterns which predict future movements – in stock prices maybe?” Mike beamed back and Alex wondered if this was a joke of some sort, suspecting that he may have misinterpreted sarcasm as enthusiasm. These sorts of nuances still often escaped him, just as they had when he was a boy. He decided that he would take the comment at face value.

“It *has* picked up patterns in stock movements and some of those turn out to be broadly predictable,” he said. Mike looked pensive at the answer, slowly nodding his head, and Alex was relieved on two counts: firstly, that he had been right to think that Mike was being genuine in his inquiries; secondly, because for some reason Alex couldn’t fathom, he felt it might signal the end of the interrogation. He decided to bring his little presentation to an end with a small speech he saved for just such occasions: “Of course, the program must also rule out false positives – it must not point to patterns where there is just co-incidence. Sometimes there just *is* no pattern.”

“Is it something to do with artificial intelligence?” Eleanor asked. She was vaguely aware through recent news that this was something which had developed in the last few years, although it sounded to her more than a little sinister; something to be feared, not investigated, certainly not celebrated.

“Absolutely, the program *is* intelligent,” Alex assured her. To keep answering questions after delivering his pre-prepared concluding speech made him want to stammer. He bit down on the impulse but even so, felt his cheeks start to prickle. “It learns to look for things even before you ask.”

Eleanor noticed the red flush which crept up Alex’s neck, and decided, almost without conscious thought, to steer the subject of conversation away from his work. Instead she moved to ground she supposed to be more secure and asked him about his other interests. She tried to look enthused when he described the science fiction he enjoyed. She let him know that she liked *Star Wars* and he had laughed, stopping himself short of informing her that, in his opinion, *Star Wars* was not really science fiction at all, was pretty much the purest crap in fact.

Then, by some occult process of social alchemy, the conversational attention turned to Mike. He entertained them with his story of the rail journey – it seemed, he told them, that the timings of trains became less reliable the further north one travelled, as if time became more plastic with the declining latitude and lengthening nights. Alex tried to interject with the story of his own journey, as surely his experiences on the coach frankly made Mike’s discomfort pale in comparison. Alex silently congratulated himself; the others appeared to receive his story politely.

Outside, the sky was darkening by the second, a great black curtain pulled across the theatrical stage which was the Earth. Thick clouds of impenetrable darkness, full to bursting with freezing rain, rolled in from over the sea, bringing a premature twilight to the town. Without warning, that rain began to pour in almost solid thundering sheets, making rivers of the roadway, churning the surface of the sea into grey froth. The three newly-met companions got up and approached the windows, Eleanor hanging back a little, alarmed by the ferocity of the downpour. In her imagination she could see the wild elements break in, showering them with splinters of jagged glass which would tear them into bloodied chunks. When she saw the rain bouncing on the pavement outside her fear didn’t seem that far-fetched. Gulls lumbered into the air, flying for shelter. Suddenly, immediately outside the window, a fish, a foot long and gleaming iridescent even in the gloom of the rainstorm, fell from the sky with a wet slap they all clearly heard and then lay gasping on the sill.

Eleanor stepped back and gasped herself.

“Fish-fall,” Alex said. “Not that unusual, in fact. Carried by one of the gulls, I might guess. There are documented cases of hundreds of fish falling, even from clear skies. All sorts of other stuff too, as if the sky was an ocean and we’re pottering about in a little pocket of air at the bottom.” He looked pleased with himself for passing on that informational gem.

“And where do you go for neat items like that?” Eleanor asked.

“For neat items,” Alex repeated, turning the words around in his mind, as if to find the answer to some puzzle. Abruptly, he looked up again. “I just read a lot.”

“Poor fish,” Eleanor said. It still thrashed about but weaker now. Eleanor didn’t want to imagine how it must feel to suffocate in the air. Could it *really* have been lifted out of the sea by one of the gulls? Even the giant bird she had noticed earlier would surely struggle to pick up a fish of that size – wouldn’t it? However the fish had got to be there, she felt terrible about just watching it die right in front of her. She wasn’t quite sure what she could do about it but before she could begin to form a rescue plan, the young receptionist was already outside, picking up the fish with a pair of thick gloves and then rushing across the road to hurl it back towards the sea. It was all so matter-of-fact that Eleanor couldn’t help wondering if this was a regular occurrence around these parts. Perhaps gulls were constantly dropping their catches in front of the hotel with the distressed creatures having to be rescued to spare the feelings of squeamish guests.

As the receptionist returned from his rescue mission, rainwater pouring from his waterproof jacket, Mike led a small round of applause. The young man acknowledged this with a brief nod of the head. “I’d not have thrown him back if he’d been a nice fat salmon,” he said and they all laughed. Before their hero – mighty but modest rescuer of fallen fish - had finished taking off his jacket, another figure rushed in and also began to strip off layers of protection before turning to greet them.

“I’m Bramley Haigh.” The new arrival had a voice used to conveying jovial authority. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long.” They carried out another round of introductions. Haigh was shorter than Eleanor had expected, almost stout enough to be portly, but even so he moved with an ease which bordered on the graceful. He told them that he had arranged a light meal. “I’ll try to brief you a bit as we eat,” he suggested.

“Weren’t there supposed to be four of us?” Eleanor asked.

“The other lady called yesterday – she can’t make it. Taken poorly, so she told me. So it’s just you three now.” Eleanor noticed that Haigh’s accent was subtly Anglicized. She imagined that Bramley might have been schooled in England, ironing out some of his Highland burr in some remote and windswept boarding house.

So, this other lady – the only other woman – had cried off, and that left Eleanor the sole female on the island for the winter. Not that she felt threatened: Mike was clearly a gentleman (although maybe fallen on hard times), and Alex was little more than a child. A long-ago colleague of Eleanor’s had once described a co-worker as a geek. Alex fit that description pretty well. There had been other geeks Eleanor had befriended over the years.

“So, let me tell you a bit more about the island, and about *Island Quest*, the company. I inherited the island from my father, and, back then, it *was* just an island – I don’t think it had seen any real commercial use for a century, maybe more. Perhaps a little common grazing, or a stop-over for local fishermen, certainly nothing organized and nobody in permanent residence. Years ago, my family owned bits and pieces of land all over Scotland – up in the Highlands as well as across the islands. The island was more or less the last remaining piece of our family property, excepting for a farm we work inland a-way. Both places had been left to look after themselves; that might have been fine a hundred years ago but things were not going so well by the time I inherited, not to put too fine a point on it. It was left to me to do something about it all. The farm…well, it was fairly obvious what needed to be done – we had to make it a proper paying business, but a farm’s a farm, no? Not so obvious what to do with the island, though. We thought we could make it into a nature reserve, somewhere for enthusiasts to go and watch the wildlife. Something for the types of city folk who think they want to enjoy nature up close. Maybe some other time, that would have worked out, but there wasn’t the demand for that sort of thing then. Those that might have been interested wanted the sort of facilities we weren’t able to install in a hurry, so we had to think of something else. Eventually we hit upon the idea of an outdoor activity centre. It took off straight away, once everything was in place, because we can offer a real adventure whereas lots of other centres only offer a sort of Disney version. Ours is the real thing – real cliffs to climb up and abseil down, real seas to canoe in, real wild areas to explore. Very few places can offer that.”

“Sounds great but I imagine that there’s quite a bit of regulation around something like that these days,” Mike said.

Haigh nodded his agreement. “Anything involving young people means you have to satisfy all sorts of requirements, let alone what’s needed from just a health and safety perspective.”

Mike spoke again. “I can imagine. I guess we’re lucky – we don’t have to get vetted.”

“That’s right,” Haigh agreed again. “Not too much paperwork needed to employ you three, I’m pleased to say. No need to worry, though, the place is as safe as it can be, for kids or for adults. Me and the crew work there all summer, never been so much as a broken bone. On the staff, you understand – can’t say quite the same for the clients.” Haigh didn’t expand on that.

They ate their meals in silence for a minute or two, before Haigh took up the story again. “So, all was going well until the first winter. It even looked like year two might see us turn a reasonable profit. We had decided to mothball the place until the next season but it turned out we didn’t do as good a job as we thought.” Eleanor admired the way the sounds in Haigh’s words rolled, warm but not quite gentle. “The rain and wind got in and the elements had nearly flattened some of the building. Mostly wooden, you see – temporary structures, as required by building regulations, but pretty secure, even so. I’m pretty confident they’d stand for twenty years and more, everything else being equal, as long as weather didn’t get to them. But you know what they say: *the best way to demolish a building is to put a hole in the roof*. Over the winter, I’m afraid that we developed one or two fair sized holes in our roof over that winter, ripped open by the winds. The rain *had* got in and we’d left the place too long – partly because of the holidays, partly because the weather made it difficult to get over and check the buildings. The end result wasn’t demolition but perhaps not too far off. So we had to make sure that the whole place was much better wrapped up come the following year, although, truth to tell, we never had such a bad winter again as that first one – I think it was the island teaching us a bit of a lesson. Warning us not to be too complacent.” Haigh smiled again, for the briefest time. “So, we started to think that it would be better to have some folk to overwinter on the island. I did it myself with my family the last couple of years, but…well, circumstances have changed for us, and that wasn’t going to be possible. So…”

“So here we are instead,” said Mike. “Your skeleton crew.”

“Your night shift,” Eleanor added quietly. Then, more confidently: “When did your season finish?”

“The final paying guests left at the end of September, and the last of the staff a couple of weeks after that. I’ve kept it ticking over and now, here you all are.”

“And the ecological work?” Alex asked.

“Funded by people who report to the devolved Scottish Government. Gives you three something to do other than watch out for storms.”

Once they had finished their food, Haigh stood up to go and the others followed suit. The weather was only promising worse to come, so they really did need to be across the water sooner rather than later, Haigh told them. Eleanor, Mike and Alex all nodded their solemn agreement. They gathered their belongings together, Alex sorting his bags out with greater care this time, making sure that he was properly balanced and then they made the dash out to Haigh’s vehicle, their movement timed to coincide with one of the brief periods during which the rain eased. Haigh directed the loading of the Landrover, the bags stowed expertly, followed by getting Eleanor and Alex into back seats, with Mike shown around to the front passenger seat. Mike slid the seatbelt across his chest and sat upright and still, staring intently out of the rain-washed windscreen.

“Not a good passenger?” asked Haigh.

“Terrible,” Mike responded brightly.

“Me too. Rather prefer to be the one in control, I’m afraid.”

Haigh leant back slightly to speak to his two other passengers. “Alright back there?” he said, shouting over rain which drummed on the vehicle’s roof.

They drove for a while without speaking, the landscape beginning to rise up around them, gradually hemming them in, their roadway dwindling to a track only barely wider than the car. They came across only one other vehicle on their trip, and to pass they had to edge around each other, like two great cautious beasts at the watering hole. Slabs of granite encroached upon them, becoming megaliths fused together into walls of dark stone. The fields around them became an imperfect mirror of grey skies and greyer sea whilst varieties of animals appeared – shaggy cattle with impractically curved horns, sheep with fiery gazes and wool that hung in greasy strips. Everything was misted with incessant rain, sometimes little more than a haze, sometimes a torrent, making the scenery alternate between soft focus and a landscape in colours of thickly applied oils.

The drive to the harbour took about forty minutes, Haigh passing the time with parcels of information about the island as they travelled. It was a well-rehearsed routine, they all realized, probably much the same spiel as would be trotted out for groups of excited schoolchildren, delivered in the same measured doses. Haigh told them that the island was isolated, a place beyond even the reach of the mobile phone networks. Alex twitched at the reminder – he was going to be continuously off the grid for the first time in his life. Haigh told them that, even so, there were ways and means of maintaining contact with the outside world. There was a two-way radio; there was a boat that they could use to cross to the mainland on most days, as long as the weather wasn’t too dreadful; the local fishermen usually came by a couple of times in the week, laying lobster pots as close to the land as they risked; sometimes a yacht would chance by – not so much in the winter, but from time to time. There were, after all, very few places in their world which didn’t enjoy endless interconnection with the rest of the planet. There was a small village spread along the coast: a shop where they could get most things, and a pub, where those lobstermen gathered of an evening. *Cuan uibhist* was the name of the pub, Haigh explained, spelling it out, which meant something like *the Sea of Uist* (it sounded better in Gaelic, Alex piped up). And there was a bus service, once a day out to Oban and once a day back, just in case they missed the big city lights. All three passengers smiled at that, all thinking of the deserted air of the seaside town they had just left behind. They all supposed that, given isolation enough and time, they might indeed come to consider Oban as the big city. In his own mind, Alex wondered where exactly the wireless internet coverage began and ended. He looked across the landscape, as if there might be a line drawn in the sky, beyond which would be a space labelled *Here Be Dragons*. Out loud, Eleanor wondered where the nearest post box was to be found. There was one outside the village shop, Haigh told her, and there was a regular collection, too: the postman was single-handedly one of the village’s most vital communication links, transporting all manner of supplies along with letters and parcels and doubling up as a taxi service of sorts.

Then, heralded by the cries of gulls which flocked in huge numbers, the roadway crested a hillock and there was the sea right beside them again, no longer hemmed in by walls or bordered by railtracks and asphalt, but rolling right over the rocks. The salt scent was strong now, pungent enough to taste in the back of the throat. The three travellers, all soporific to some degree after their long journeys and Haigh’s almost hypnotic litany, came to again with a sudden, fierce intensity, and wriggled themselves more upright in their seats, all speaking at once.

Mike: “That’s incredible.”

Eleanor: “How beautiful!”

Alex: “Wow!”

Haigh grinned, proud as a father of a new-born son.

*Chapter 7: The Island*

Haigh found them all cagoules of various degrees of wear from under the seats at the back of the Landrover and as they pulled them on, he talked through safety drills for the boat.

“Is that the island?” Mike asked, pointing across the bay at an indistinct lump in the mist.

“No, we can’t see it from here in these conditions. I’ll let you know as soon as it comes into view,” said Haigh. He seemed to be hurrying them along, Mike thought. Maybe it was just the usual pace of his instruction for new clients but Mike suspected something more. Haigh had told them earlier that he wanted to get them across the sound before the weather worsened, but Mike sensed an impatience to get everything resolved, to tie up loose ends. Maybe the man had a plane to catch and was simply anxious to be away. Whatever the reason, Mike identified in Haigh a tension trembling just below the surface, enough to ring a distant but persistent alarm.

They got their bags onto the boat without incident – Alex blanched when he set eyes on the craft, tiny against the huge scale of the Scottish sea and skies, rising and falling in the swell, jerking from side to side with the action of the waves, occasionally crashing against the quay. He found it difficult to imagine how he would actually get on it: by the time he had calculated where the vessel was, and where it would be safe to set foot, it would have moved again and he would slip into the sea. When the time came for them to descend the ladder, Alex found that he stepped on board without the need to think at all. He felt inordinately proud of himself.

With everyone safely aboard, the craft seemed much more substantial than when viewed from above. From this closer perspective, the boat was rolling *with* the waves rather than being thrown about *by* them. There was some additional activity around the ropes – Alex noted that at this point Haigh seemed to direct most of the explanations to Mike, as if he had taken stock of his three new employees and had already decided that Mike was to be the boss of the overwinter gang. Alex didn’t necessarily feel that this was the wrong decision; he was well aware of his own shortcomings when it came to practical activities and although Eleanor had a certain air of pragmatism about her, it was equally obvious that she was not exactly an outdoorswoman. Even so, the choice rankled the tiniest bit: these like-minded men sniffed each other out by some chemistry; he simply and irrevocably lacked the gene for male camaraderie.

Then, the instruction all done, the lines were cast off and with a powerful surge of acceleration, the little boat jumped across the waves. Haigh piloted from a small cabin in the bows, barely large enough for him to squeeze in his full frame. Spray flew in the air, mixing with the last drizzles of rain from the clearing skies, making the water salt and sharp. Gleams of sunshine appeared through the clouds, becoming beams of light that stood on the sea as straight as pillars. The rays’ footprints on the face of the waters were bright enough to pick out the rippled details of waves, no longer uniform grey but startling shades of green and blue. For Mike and Eleanor, the rough splendour was transfixing: for Alex, there was a whole other dimension, unsuspected by his companions. He saw the mathematical patterns in the waves, hugely complex, but stunningly beautiful, colours overlaid on colours. To him, the elegance was the purest hue of delicate silver and he thrilled silently to the inevitability of each crest and dip.

Mike sat near to the wheelhouse, one elbow over the side relishing the spray in his face. He saw the sunlight catch upon the crest of a single wave, the water glowing as if caught in a new pewter dish. It made Mike’s heart swell with a pleasure which, for such a length of time, he had not even guessed at. Then he raised his eyes by the merest degree to see the same light now played across the tops of countless more waves, bright lights flickering like a field of transient jewels, and his joy for a single second froze the world so that he knew nothing but an ecstasy so wonderful that it wounded.

“That’s it,” Haigh told them, turning slightly to shout over his shoulder, and gesturing at the scene ahead.

As the boat swung about a final headland, a small hummock of rock was outlined perfectly against the horizon, a fresh shaft of light helpfully illuminating their new island home from end to end. Mike’s earlier joy faded, such intense feelings only allowed to last a moment. In its place, a weight of guilt that he should dare to be so happy, even for a second, fell on him with such brutal suddenness that his shoulders dropped. Mike wiped at his face with his sleeve, clearing sea-spray and rain away.

Approaching the island, they motored into a small bay sheltered by two low spits of land, like pincers almost closing together on a rough circle of water, relatively untroubled by the wind and tide. The boat came alongside a small stone jetty and the process of securing the vessel began. A few rough steps led from their level up to a walkway above.

“Rock,” Mike said, unloading bags. He patted one of the steps, worn to a smooth bow.

“The jetty’s been around for a long time, before there were local councils to worry about construction regulations. Not even sure who built it, to be truthful, but I’m glad they did – saved us a fortune.” That bit sounded a little less like a lecture, Mike thought.

Haigh organized them into a chain so that all the bags could be conveyed up the steps. A path ran along the top of the spit, straight to a building which squatted atop a gentle incline a short way from the water’s edge, placing it way above the high-tide line, itself marked by a thick brown border of dying seaweed. Beyond that, the island rose into a hump of rock and simultaneously broadened so that from the air, the island looked like a teardrop, albeit with claws.

Haigh hurried them along the path and into the timber-built chalet which was the island’s sole human structure. There was a front door opening directly into a high porch, where overcoats and boots were evidently stored. Long benches sat along the walls and as they stripped off their coats, their four jackets looked out of place hanging in an area where there was space for dozens. Eleanor thought that it looked a little sad, as was the way of things at the end of their term. The wet slicks of material clumped together, making the coats look like a family of rain-drenched roosting bats.

Then Haigh led them through an inner door into the main room. He gestured them towards a group of sofas, mismatched except in as much as that they were all so old and faded that their original patterning had all but disappeared. The ancient seating was nonetheless surprisingly comfortable and despite its age had a newly-laundered freshness. The springs of the sofa rang discordant peals of compressing metal as the group settled. Haigh busied himself in the kitchen area at the opposite side of the building, putting a kettle on a hob to boil.

In one corner of the living area sat a wood burner, logs and kindling stacked neatly alongside, a good half the length of the wall taken up by the pile, which reached right up to the ceiling. Eleanor looked around, and decided that this could be a happy home. Bisecting the room, which comprised the whole width of the building, were two lines of refectory tables with benches upturned on their tops. Clearly, this would be where the summer guests would have their meals. Haigh returned to the seating area with steaming mugs of coffee, all of which bore the logo of *Island Quest*.

“So here we are,” Haigh said. “What do you think?”

There was silence – not because there was any difficulty finding something to say, but because it was hard to find the right words to describe a place so extraordinary. There was beauty in the island, certainly, fierce and uncompromising, but more than that. The island was its own place, entire to itself, every part of the landscape speaking of ages passing against which all the concerns of humanity would have counted for nothing. Finally Eleanor felt compelled to break the silence. “It’s amazing,” she exclaimed and her fellow islanders were quick to agree.

“I genuinely feel very lucky to be the custodian of the island,” he said. “I know you’ll do a great job looking after the place, so thank you in advance.” Haigh glanced at each of them in turn. “Just to be absolutely clear - it is about housesitting, so if you can make any running repairs without putting yourselves in danger then that’s great. Otherwise, we just need to have someone living here, keeping it warm, aired. Please don’t worry…” *Did Haigh look at me when he said that?* wondered Eleanor “…about lack of practical skills. You weren’t hired for that.”

Somehow, Eleanor thought, Haigh’s little speech, although clearly aimed at being reassuring, wasn’t. There *had* surely been some process of vetting, hadn’t there? Eleanor wasn’t sure how well she remembered it, though. She certainly hadn’t spoken with Haigh in person before – had Freya perhaps, on her behalf? Eleanor found that she really could not remember. The same thought, in varying forms, was simultaneously occurring to Mike and Alex. Mike mulled over the earlier conversations, at the hotel and in the Landrover – did secrets ever get uncovered in those selection processes, he wondered? Did some men find their past catching up with them? For Alex, the days and weeks were a haze, undifferentiated, confused. He didn’t think that was entirely due to any drugs consumed, either. They all sipped at their drinks, briefly absent in separate thoughts.

Haigh was carrying on: “We usually take new arrivals on a short tour. It doesn’t take too long. One advantage of being on an island is that there’s only so far you can go before you’re starting to come back again. Are you all up for a short round trip?” He smiled broadly then jumped up; it was obviously more of an invitation than a question.

The three of them murmured confused agreement. Eleanor glanced quickly at the sky, already darkening.

“Have to be tomorrow before we get outside, we’ve lost the daylight. But I can get you all settled in here after a quick look around the building.”

Functional little rooms off from a central passageway would be their bedrooms, with the showers and toilets on the same corridor, and a walk-in pantry at the end. Other doorways led off left and right to rooms sleeping groups of eight in bunk beds, and a final door led to the outdoors. The bunks, stripped of bedding, were now just bare wooden skeletons, the rooms empty as prison cells. Their own accommodation, on the other hand, was surprisingly well appointed, if not sizeable. Large windows presented views of the sea and the seashore. Each room had a stove in one corner, a smaller version of the wood burner in the communal area, with a chimney which disappeared up into the roof space and a stock of cut logs, the smaller cousin of the huge heap of firewood in the communal room. They each had a bookcase full of paperbacks, fat with use, spines creased and covers peeling at the edges, presumably abandoned by previous guests. Next to each bed was a small fold-up table on each of which sat a tiny vase with a handful of wild flowers. A free-standing wardrobe completed the furnishings.

Taking them back into the dining room, Haigh opened up his bag and took out parcels wrapped in silver foil which he opened on the table to reveal hunks of cheese and bread. “Thought you might appreciate a snack before you turned in?” They finished off the food, filling the time with inconsequential chat. To be so few in a room built to house dozens made them feel small, a lingering spark holding out against the encroaching cold. It was difficult not to whisper, like being in a church. Finally they agreed that it was time to sleep – they had all been travelling for what felt like days. None of them spent long settling in, warmth having leached through from the living room, even if the Atlantic chill lay close beneath. Within a few tens of minutes more, they all slept.

The next morning, after checking over their bedrooms again in the daylight and a quick breakfast, they were all back in waterproofs and forming a dutiful queue behind Haigh as he prepared to set out on their tour. The sun was hidden, for the most part, behind luxuriant clouds and rain oozed from sopping wet air, but nothing could mask the primitive grandeur of their new home. Around the back of the main building were the workshops – one housing a petrol-driven generator of fearsome looking complexity. Haigh spent some time telling them how to operate the device, promising them it wasn’t as difficult as it appeared at first. “Do you think you’ll be alright with that, if necessary, Mike?” asked Haigh. Mike replied that he most likely would; the instructions for use were printed on the side of the machine in any case. Eleanor hadn’t brought any electrical devices with her, having being told that the island had no mains electricity.

“Have you got anything that runs off the mains?” she asked Alex.

“There’s the laptop, but I’ve got a solar charger for that.”

“You’ll need the sun first, though – don’t always get a great deal of that around here, not come November at least,” Haigh interjected with a hint of a smile.

Alex considered for a while, analysing whether Haigh’s comment was intended as a joke. “It only needs a couple of hours of daylight to charge up,” he answered eventually. Haigh smiled at Alex, then turned to Mike to grin more broadly.

The store rooms seemed to hold everything which might conceivably be needed – there was a full range of power-tools – Eleanor blushed, suddenly realising that the generator was used to run drills, sanders and saws, not mobile phone chargers and microwaves. It was a reminder that they were on the island to carry out a function, part of which was to effect repairs if necessary. Alex didn’t even recognize a good half of the tools that hung in neat rows on the walls, so he silently hoped that he wouldn’t be called on to make too much use of them. Another part of the store room contained kerosene for the lamps. Haigh showed them how to fill the lamps, and that, at least, seemed relatively straightforward. Opening up the containers of the oily liquid caused sickly fumes to blossom out into the already stale air, cloying like the perfume of poisonous flowers. Haigh noticed their reaction and told them that it was a smell that you got used to on the island – that you even sort-of missed when you got returned to civilization. There were enough supplies of the kerosene to last well into the next season, Haigh told them, so there was little chance of running out.

“Any of you smokers, though?” he asked.

“No,” they answered in unison.

“Just as well. If any of you do think to take up the habit, don’t come in here to light up. The place would go up like a rocket,” he mimed an explosion, then led them on.

Gas canisters for the cooking appliances were kept in a wire mesh cage on the side of the building and here again Haigh assured them that there was plenty of fuel to last them through the winter. They would probably have to change over the canisters once or twice over the course of the next three months, he told them, but the store held six of the cylinders and Haigh had only connected the most recent one in the past week or so, and there had been very little gas used since then. He showed them how to connect and disconnect a canister to the valve and they watched intently, all with a dawning awareness of the sobering reality of their situation.

“Why do we keep them in a cage?” Eleanor asked.

Haigh mimed an explosion again, glancing over at Mike as he did.

“I see,” Eleanor mumbled but they were moving again so it didn’t seem likely that Haigh, or either of the others, had heard her.

The path ran on past the side of the building, then curved away around the hummock behind. Haigh pointed towards a brackish-looking pond. “That’s the water supply,” he said. “It runs into the accommodation block to provide water for drinking and washing.”

“It doesn’t look very…,” Eleanor struggled for the right word.

“Hygienic?” Haigh supplied for her. “What’s in the pool is absolutely pure rainwater, Eleanor, and what comes out of the taps is perfectly fine to drink. A bit like good whiskey, minus the alcohol – filtered through peat, of course.” He watched her for a second or two longer and then laughed. “Don’t worry. It’s one of the things all the kids who come here ask about. Second on the list of most-asked questions when it comes to island sanitation. The water in the main accommodation block does come through peat, as I said, but we also have a pretty-much state of the art purification unit with carbon and bacteriological filters buried just about…*here*.” He dug his heel into the ground. The surface did seem marginally more solid than the surrounding bog. “Shouldn’t need to mess about with the filters at all, but if the water suddenly turns a bit brown, replace the filters with new ones – all labelled in the store, together with a map which gives directions to the filtration units, in case you forget. Not that a bit of peaty water would do any harm – there’s plenty of folk and more than a few companies in the highlands that will add a bit of grain alcohol to your ordinary peat water and be selling it for a small fortune as premium single malt.”

“What’s the number one question?” asked Alex. He liked his lists complete.

“I imagine it has something to do with what happens *after* you drink the water,” Mike said.

“Exactly so,” agreed Haigh.

“After?” Eleanor said. “Sewage?” It hadn’t occurred to her at all but she could understand how that topic might loom large for kids brought up to think that the measure of the progression of modern civilization was the distance maintained between the average person and their own waste.

“Everything from our toilets goes through a rudimentary treatment system, then basically straight out into the sea. The fish love it. In fact our outlet pipe is one of the best places to set the lobster pots. Just remember that the next time you go for a meal in a fancy restaurant and order up a tasty half of fresh sea-caught lobster.” Neither Eleanor nor Alex had actually ever eaten lobster in their lives – the idea rather repulsed Eleanor, while Alex was fairly certain that he wouldn’t much care for the texture – and Mike was of the opinion that his lobster-eating days were behind him. Even so, they all smiled politely.

Haigh led the group up towards the summit of the island. Out of the shelter of the bay, the wind became harsher, driving rain to slap brutally at the material of their waterproofs, chafing uncovered skin. Haigh let them pause to take in the view and took the opportunity to point out some of the neighbouring islands. A few had been inhabited fleetingly in the past for one reason or another – on one, a lonely crofter; on another, a local company had excavated building materials for a few hard years; on a third there had once been a fishing community. All were deserted now, the tentative inroads made by humanity erased, as much a result of declining economic fortunes as of the forces of nature. The unspoken irony for a company like *Island Quest* was that the rich paid for their children to enjoy a taste of being in places where the poor could no longer afford to live.

On the side of the island there was a path to a position where the safety ropes of climbers and abseilers could be secured, Haigh explained, but he advised them to tread carefully there, as the winter weather would make those lower paths treacherous. The climbing ropes and equipment had all been taken off the island to be checked or replaced; if any of them were climbers, Haigh hoped that they had brought kit with them, as they would be climbing at their own risk.

The upper path narrowed as they progressed, tapering to barely a shoulders-width and as the group dropped into single file Eleanor instinctively took a handful of the back of Mike’s coat. With the wind gusting erratically and the rain greasing the rocks underfoot, it seemed that it would be very easy to slip and tumble to the edge of the grass, and from there over the precipice which had now crept alarmingly close. Haigh was in front, with Mike and Eleanor huddled together in the middle and Alex at the back. Being in high places never worried Alex – many of the things which routinely worried others held few terrors for Alex – and he turned to look back the way they had come. One side of the building below was in shadow, so dark in the intermittent sunshine that it appeared almost molten, clinging to the wall in defiance of gravity, thick and heavy as midnight. To see anything within shade so total would be impossible – it would be to discern greater darkness within what was already ebon – but even so, Alex felt that he could make out someone there, rooted still and watching their uncertain progress keenly. Another mist of rain gusted into his eyes, making the scene blur and fracture. When he wiped his eyes there was nothing to see. He turned and hurried after the rest of the party, hoping that this wasn’t the start of a drug-induced flashback.

At the end of the path, Haigh found shelter against a large outcrop and stopped to point down towards the rocks below. “There’s another track which takes you around the island along the coast – I’ll leave you to explore that one for yourselves in due time. Take that around to the far point and you’ll come across our caverns. In the summer, we sometimes camp out in the caves, as a sort of expedition, but mostly these days that’s it.”

“When you say that’s it for *these days*, did something else used to go on in the caves?” Mike asked. The wind was rising, but Mike didn’t yet need to shout to make himself heard. “In the olden days?”

Haigh stole a quick glance at his watch. “They got used by locals to stash smuggled goods or to hide away stuff washed up in the shipwrecks – anything that they would rather not declare to the authorities. *Allegedly*. So, those same locals used to tell gruesome stories about the caves in order to keep other people away. I’ve slept in those caves a good many times, though, and I’ve never seen anything, they’re just tales to keep people from sticking their noses in where they’re not welcome.”

On returning to the chalet, there was more information which Haigh needed to pass on – seemingly a never-ending stream of it. He showed them the two-way radio and told them to talk to the coastguard every couple of days; if there was a real emergency, they could get a helicopter over to the island pretty quickly. He showed them the boathouse, really only an alcove tucked into the wall of their miniature harbour and the craft inside. They could keep the supply boat berthed on the island, although that came with the warning that it should not be used if the wind was likely to get too strong, as there was a danger that it could flip over. A second craft, a semi-rigid inflatable was also tied up in the harbour – but that was Haigh’s lift back to the Mainland.

Again, Haigh seemed to entrust Mike with most of the technical details, handing over to him a folder of information about all the different aspects of life on the island. Eleanor eyed the folder with trepidation – it looked both big and likely to be highly technical. She was glad that Mike was taking charge of the folder, as it meant that she could focus on day-to-day practicalities, making things comfortable for all of them. She started mental lists of everything which needed doing.

The atmosphere had been genial but as the day subtly faded into the gloom of the encroaching twilight once again, the feeling became less jovial and more business-like. Haigh’s warnings became more frequent and the projected consequences of ignoring those warnings more dire; the list of tasks *which could not under any circumstances be neglected* grew by the minute, while the litany of those things which *must not on any account be done* grew almost as fast. For any foreseeable situation there were protocols to follow but hedged about with so many caveats and exemptions that it finally seemed that there were more exceptions than rules.

*Chapter 8: Eleanor*

Despite the gradual clouding of the general mood, Eleanor’s excitement grew and grew, becoming almost painful. She had tried at first to listen to Haigh’s instructions but was relieved to see that Mike appeared to be taking on board the information on behalf of them all. When Haigh finally motored off into a dusk that spanned both the sea and the sky, Eleanor had been almost hopping with joy. Some indefinable sense of tenancy – ownership, even – had shifted perceptibly from Haigh to the three of them. Haigh, emperor of this domain, had left them in charge and with his departure it now felt like it was finally theirs.

She had waved Haigh off and had then rushed back inside their new home. Once through the doors, Eleanor turned to examining the others again. Mike, she thought, was hard to read – he wasn’t obviously excited in the way that she was but nor was he looking in any way apprehensive. She guessed that he might have experience in keeping his emotions to himself. Another attractive trait, Eleanor thought. Alex, on the other hand, had grown increasingly pale as each successive bond with the outside world was loosened.

“I’ll make us dinner tonight,” she said, vaguely aware that her voice seemed shrill. She realised that her shoulders had risen up to meet her ears and she forced herself to relax.

“We should make a rota,” Mike proclaimed with the air of a decision made.

Eleanor murmured agreement. “Yes, of course, but that’s for tomorrow. Today I want to make you two a nice meal and that can be my welcome gift to you.”

Alex spoke up to clinch the matter. *People will be offended if you turn down gifts*, the shade of Mrs Neville whispered. “That sounds great to me,” he told her. “Thank you!”

“Looks like I’m outvoted,” Mike grinned, raising his hands in surrender.

Mike lit some of the kerosene lamps and got the fire going while Eleanor busied herself in the kitchen, finding where everything was kept and exploring the well-stocked pantry. As night fell outside, the view of the sea was replaced by their own reflections, the three of them moving carefully around each other in a space which reduced them to the scale of children. Only when Eleanor got close to the window, effectively blocking the light inside with her own body, was she able to glimpse the seascape once again. Whatever might be outside, Eleanor realised, would able to watch them with impunity, invisible from within the building.

Picking up one of the lamps, Eleanor marched along to the store room. There was a manifest hanging on a hook inside the door detailing everything they had for the winter: lots of tinned produce, dried goods, some food which needed eating up fairly quickly – a basket of apples, even a solitary hand of bananas, already browning. They would be eating a lot of pasta and rice, she thought. Eleanor quickly scanned the list to work out what she could put together as a passable three-course meal. Eventually, feeling pleased with her choices and carrying an armful of ingredients, she paused for a moment outside of the door into the refectory to listen for any conversation between Mike and Alex. Lots of men, she imagined would take the opportunity of her absence to have a talk together. She could make out a low hum of conversation, too quiet to make out exactly what was being said. Her pride would not allow going so far as stooping to press an ear to the door itself, so she took a deep breath and went back in. Immediately, the chattering stopped.

“Getting to know each other?” she asked. The two men exchanged brief glances from opposite ends of the room and Eleanor smiled, hoping it made her look open and friendly.

“Thought we could save the life stories until we were all together. That way we won’t have to repeat ourselves,” said Mike. He returned her smile but changed the subject. “Can I help with anything? Stirring pots, opening tins, I’m a dab hand at it all.”

“No, Mike, I want this to be my treat for the two of you, so you sit yourselves down and we can have our meal, then perhaps share our stories. Maybe Alex can tell us something more about his computer program. What do you say Alex?”

Alex looked up from where he was squatting at the wood burner, feeding the fire. “Sure…if you’re interested. If you want.”

“I think that would be great, what do you think, Mike?”

Mike agreed that her plan was good. Before long, he was stirring pots and mixing ingredients, just as promised. Beyond a token protest, Eleanor had not objected.

In the end, though, they didn’t get to hear anything more about Alex’s project that evening. When the dinner was finished they all agreed that the day had caught up with them and that they’d prefer to go to bed rather than stay up any longer. After all, they had the whole winter to catch up on each other’s life-stories.

Eleanor was first in the washrooms, which were separated into male and female facilities; she supposed that she would always have at least this area to herself if she needed a bit of ‘me-time’. She found herself thinking about where the flushed water ended up and wondering about the lobsters which lurked at the other end of the pipes, according to Haigh. She wondered if it might be possible for one of the creatures to make its way *up* the wastepipe. She thought it was pretty unlikely, but even so, spent as little time as possible sat on the toilet, and closed the lid firmly when finished. She heard the men next door, presuming their wash room to be mirror image of her own and once again heard talking. It was unlike the speech she had overheard earlier – this time, there were two distinct deep tones, recognizably belonging to Mike and Alex. The sounds she had heard earlier had been pitched higher, to become child-like, almost shrill. She guessed it had to be some trick of the acoustics in the building, the perceptible ghosts of the young people who had been the clients of *Island Quest* over the years.

Exhaustion tangibly drummed in her ears and combined with the ululating hiss of the lamp so that she felt beyond tired – almost drugged. She finished up cleaning her teeth and was putting things away in her washbag when one word in the conversation from the next room caught her attention. “…Eleanor…,” one of them had said, and she instantly froze, not even breathing as she strained to hear more. Quiet as she was, the rest of the conversation was no more audible than it had been before and before half a minute had passed she had to breathe again.

Eleanor sat on her bed and looked around at the belongings she had set out: a cheap frame held a photograph showing her with work colleagues, the picture taken on a corporate bonding exercise, back when there had been Government money for that sort of thing. Eleanor remembered that it had been an unexpectedly delightful day, full of laughter and a sense of cohesion that the group never exhibited again. Looking back, it was strange that a cheesy team-building exercise had simultaneously worked so well and failed so utterly. She could hear her mother’s ethereal complaint that there was no photo of *her* on Eleanor’s table and Eleanor took some bitter-sweet comfort in that.

Eleanor had drawn the curtains when she had first come in, but then decided that she wanted to let in whatever natural light there was outside. On the bedside table there was a paperback book, one of a few she had brought with her, vaguely hoping that the others might have books to swap. With that in mind, she had carried titles that were fairly anodyne and might appeal to anyone, men and women, young and old. In the event, it seemed that she might well be hoping in vain on that score – it didn’t seem likely that Mike was a great reader (although why did she think that?); Alex, she felt sure, would be an aficionado of science fiction and fantasy. Eleanor would have been mildly surprised on both counts – in fact Mike read quite widely, and had with him a couple of books which would have appealed to Eleanor. Alex actually had little patience for anything not grounded in solid reality, so whilst a little science fiction made it on to his list of approved reading, there would be no fantasy. For now, Eleanor knew nothing of that, however, and preparing for the night she entertained herself by imagining further background details about her companions. A little of that speculation concerned Alex – after all, she had to look after him as well – but for the most part it concerned Mike. He had a vulnerability, Eleanor believed, which meant that for all his evident machismo there had at some point been an episode of weakness. A man like him would certainly have been married, so maybe this mysterious catastrophe, whatever it had been, centred upon a woman. There had been a wife, Eleanor told herself, who had divorced Mike after he had embarked on a disastrous affair, the whole thing leaving him questioning his values. He had needed a period of seclusion to put his life back together and had somehow washed up on the shores of the island, like the drifts of ocean wastes they were supposed to be recording. Still spinning these stories of parallel lives from the slight material she had at hand, Eleanor climbed into her bed, thought about reading for a while, before deciding that she would not. When she reached across to extinguish her lamp the light faded rapidly to leave a sickly yellow after-image which, as it died, left Eleanor staring wide-eyed into an incomplete darkness.

It was impossible to tell how much later it was that she awoke from an untroubled sleep, struggling for a moment in that liminal time to remember where she was. A dim moonlight waxed and waned with passing clouds, creating dimness that bloomed and withered in the corners of her room. Sitting up, she wondered what it was that had awoken her so precipitously. She peered into the gloom and listened. There was nothing at first. Then, there it was, a sound at once both utterly familiar and wildly out of place. She had lived with that very same sound as a relentless background to virtually every day of her working life, and it was so familiar, so common, that it would have been easy to ignore. In this context, though, in a place without electricity, in the middle of the night, the dull and far away sound of fingers tapping at the keys on a computer keyboard was decidedly out of place. Eleanor sat up a little straighter in her bed. *Where the hell was the sound coming from?* Not from within her room, of course, but close. She turned her head slowly from side to side, triangulating. The racket was relentless – she would have said that the typist was pretty proficient, if this was their usual work-rate. Then the only possible explanation occurred to Eleanor and she slid back down in her bed again. It had to be Alex, working on whatever it was that he did. Rather selfish of him to be clattering away into the early hours but he was the only one who would have a charged-up computer. He probably had no idea that the sound would carry in the way it did in their new accommodation, but even so, she could hardly allow him to disturb all her nights in this way. She told herself that she would have to speak with him tomorrow, ask him perhaps to stay in the refectory rather than in his room if he absolutely had to work at night. With that decision made, she slipped back into sleep. This time the faint tapping failed to rouse her. She slept until she was woken again by someone calling her name, again and again.

*Chapter 9: Alex*

As Eleanor was falling into sleep for the second time, in the room next door Alex lay and listened to the rain which had been rattling against the roof of their home, a pitter-patter which swelled and retreated in time with the rise and fall of the wind. It sounded pretty wet out there, Alex thought. It didn’t matter how good your oilskins were, prolonged rain had a knack for finding its way in. He tried to find other patterns in the rain, even considered getting up and turning his computer on to let the program have a listen. He cross-matched the rhythm of the falling rain against the regularity of his own breathing. There *was* a colour to be found, pearly-grey and satisfying but far from the exhilarating mesh of silver that had overlain his trip across the sea.

Alex closed his eyes to let the numbers flow more easily. He had always found it difficult to explain his thinking processes to others, always tried to cast the mathematics as being like dancing numbers, aiming to make what he did accessible, but for Alex himself, the processes were visual. He saw his maths as flows and vortices of colours, sometimes small rivulets of a pure hue, at other times oceans of comingling currents in endless tints and tones, measure become visible. As Alex closed his eyes, the bright colours of his mathematical imagination sparked into life and he began to calculate. After a while he entered a state of heightened awareness which often left him disoriented in the mornings, exhausted sometimes, while the streams of living numbers still twisted silently across the screen of his mind. Then he became aware again, seeing something which disturbed the flowing torrent, a dark eddy which left some important part of his thoughts spiralling without aim before dwindling to nothing. A still wakeful part of Alex’s mind was forced to contemplate the nature of this disturbance, and he began to hear something, a sound in the messy, non-mathematical *real* world, a noise which was very close. His eyes snapped open and the mathematics, delicate as gently swarming snowflakes, shrivelled away. He concentrated on the sound which had brought him out of his meditation. It was as if someone lay directly beneath him and was whispering, very softly. It was high pitched - a woman? There was only one woman in the building, only one woman on the island.

“Eleanor?” he called quietly. There was no reply, excepting that the whispering faltered for the briefest moment before it resumed with renewed urgency. He found it difficult to believe that Eleanor would have crept into his room to lie underneath his bed just in an attempt to wake him up, but, as someone was once supposed to have said, if you eliminate the impossible, the answer is whatever remains, however improbable. So, Eleanor had come into his room to…to do *what*, exactly? Play some sort of prank? Alex tried to analyse the thought, to peer into it in order to find an answer but there was nothing to be seen. It made no sense, so it had no colour.

“Eleanor,” he called a bit more energetically. Still there was no response, this time not even a hiccup in the singsong pulse. It sounded like a catechism, Alex thought, although he couldn’t identify any recurring linguistic structures. He wondered what sense his program would make of it – if there was a pattern there at all, he was confident the program would find it.

“Eleanor, is that you?” he repeated, a little louder still.

The whispering stopped.

Alex stared into the gloom. He swung his legs out of bed and then dropped to his knees, hesitating only for the briefest moment before lifting up the bedclothes to peer under the bed. He could see nothing, but that was no surprise – the area beneath the bed was the darkest part of a very dark room. For most, there would have been a frisson of fear by now. An isolated island, in midnight black, someone seemingly whispering under your bed…but Alex didn’t have the right sort of imagination to be scared. He literally *couldn’t* picture what might be under the bed if it wasn’t his companion. If it was her, then this was *Eleanor* he was thinking about – what was she going to do? Murder him? Kiss him? Perhaps she was one of that rarest of breeds, the sleepwalker, although it seemed supremely unlikely that she would find her way to his room and get under his bed, whatever her state of somnambulism. Without evidence, without being able to see for himself, the alternatives felt equally unlikely. All was a blank canvas waiting to be illustrated by the dense cadences of reality.

He grasped the bed’s wooden frame with one hand and stretched out the other. He expected to feel something soft and yielding but encountered nothing. Eventually, he sat up on the floor, thinking hard. Was it possible that he had been mistaken, had not really heard whispering at all, but had managed to conjure an auditory hallucination combining the sounds of the rain, the wind and his own fugue-state breathing? Possibly there was some natural interference pattern resulting from all those things overlapping? More prosaically, maybe sounds were transmitted along piping or through air ducts from neighbouring rooms. He found that he couldn’t remember if there had been anything like that visible in the walls.

Alex stood up with a sigh – now he had to find his torch and have a proper look. He felt a tiredness and a tension which he knew could be chased away if only he had brought the right pills with him. But he hadn’t. That had been part of the deal he had struck with himself about this whole island experience. No drugs, no distractions, however bad that made him feel in the short term. Then his torch flared into life, the sudden illumination making his eyes smart. He fiddled with the settings and adjusted the light to emit a gentler glow. Now the lighting was so soft that it stripped the edges from everything in the room, making everything appear to be constructed of faded fabrics, all that would have been precise in the sunlight hours now softened and blurred. He placed the torch carefully on the seat of the chair to illuminate the greatest possible arc of space and had a quick look around. There was no vent, as he had suspected.

Alex pondered what to do, knowing that he would find rest problematic if there was no answer to his puzzle. Next, he dragged out the wardrobe to look at the wall behind it. The wardrobe was mostly empty – he had not had a lot to put in it and in any case most of what he had brought with him was still folded in his bags. Had there been a noise coming from somewhere behind this furniture, he supposed that it was not impossible that the empty space might have somehow transformed the sounds from another room into the whispers he had heard. He picked up his torch and shone it towards the wall. But here again, there was no grille or opening so he pushed the wardrobe back into position, as carefully as he could, although it still made a terrible grinding screech as it was jammed up against the wall. Alex didn’t want to be waking his housemates – he remembered an incident early in his University days when he had decided to do some rearrangement of the furniture in his rooms one night. Before too long he had been shocked to be confronted with a stream of indignant students complaining about the racket he was making. It had taken an age for Alex to figure out exactly why all these people were so angry and in the meantime he had stood in his doorway, puzzling. Suddenly he experienced a flash of inspiration, which revealed not only what the problem was but had also allowed him to empathise with their annoyance: *they* wanted to sleep and *he* was stopping them. Not the most difficult calculation for a man reckoned by some measures to be a genius, for sure, but he had felt very proud of that bit of thinking. With a revelatory sense of rapture, he had started to tell his angry visitors that he now understood their concerns, but somehow that only served to make them even more agitated, so he simply shut the door, turned out the lights, and slept on the floor, hardly daring to touch a single piece of his furniture again, even just to sit on, for a full week. So, Alex knew all about the possible risks of waking up his neighbours. He returned to the task in hand. He tried to lift the bed out rather than drag it, but again it scraped across the floor, like fingernails on a blackboard, only to reveal seamless walls again – no vents and no pipework – because there was no central heating, of course, and certainly nothing like air-con.

Finally, and as quietly as he was able, Alex got the room back the way it had been, lay down on his bed, before turning off his torch and trying to get to sleep again. At some point in his investigations the rain had stopped and he had not even noticed, so when he closed his eyes, the quiet was more profound, but fragile, like some precious thing poised beneath a crushing weight. The numbers had fled, hiding like frightened animals and when that happened it always made Alex worry that there would come a day when they would run away and not reappear. The silence in his room was almost complete when the whispering started again. This time it seemed a bit clearer, so that Alex became aware of the words even before he was fully aware of the whispering itself. It was high in pitch but with a tone that buzzed in his head like an angry wasp.

“Eleanor, is that you?” he said yet again, and when the whispering continued, he decided that he must drown it out.

“Eleanor! Eleanor!” he said, louder and louder, until the whispering was lost and he was finally able to slip into sleep.

*Chapter 10: Mike*

Mike had decided that the island – Haigh had called it something jaw-breaking in Gaelic, which he roughly translated as *The Island that Stands Alone* – would challenge its latest carers over the next few weeks in ways they could hardly imagine. The testing might come with extremes of weather, or with unaccustomed isolation. There would be situations that none of them had ever come across before: more than their loneliness itself, perhaps, would be the fear of being lonely, or by situations more visceral, thunderstorms, rough seas and winds more than capable of tearing chunks out of buildings. Mike didn’t doubt any of that.

Even so, he was surprised when in the middle of the night he was woken by an uproar in the neighbouring rooms. He heard Alex shouting Eleanor’s name, repeatedly. He climbed out of his bed and fumbled on the bedside table for the matches to light his lamp. As he got it going, Alex became louder and Mike heard another door open onto the corridor. Eleanor, presumably.

Suddenly, a strangely attractive idea occurred to Mike: he could extinguish his lamp, roll over and pretend that he had heard nothing. Getting involved – with Alex, with Eleanor, with anyone at all – seemed like a bad idea. He waited, the idea of ignoring what was happening trembling at the edge of his acceptance. Instead he abruptly slipped out of bed and got to his feet. Holding the lamp stretched above his head, he envisaged himself as being the Hermit in the Tarot, although possibly without the requisite Hermetic wisdom. With his free hand he opened the door to the corridor in time to see Eleanor peering out from her room, her face inserted perfectly between the door and the frame. In the pale light she appeared ashen, eyes so sunken in shadow as to be invisible.

“You O.K?” Mike asked. She turned to look at him and he could see at once that she was not afraid at all. Her eyes all but shone with excitement.

“The poor thing,” she whispered. “He must be having some sort of nightmare.”

Mike thought that Alex sounded remarkably lucid for a dreamer, but instead of saying as much, he nodded. “What do you want to do?”

Eleanor blinked. “We should wake him up, gently,” she said. Fleetingly, Mike wondered why she hadn’t already gone in to his room to tend to him. Perhaps she wanted to help, but didn’t want to go barging into a stranger’s bedroom. Perhaps she had been waiting for Mike to show up and provide some moral support. *Or maybe she just wanted an audience,* he thought, a little meanly.

Eleanor moved towards Alex’s room: gently calling to him. As her hand reached for the door-handle, the repetition stopped and the noise was gone, an echo ghosting into silence. Eleanor hesitated and then rapped gently on the door. Mike noticed how small her hands were.

“Alex?” she called with quiet urgency. There was no reply. She knocked again.

“Who is it?” Alex asked. He sounded confused, someone woken up in the middle of the night – but was there something else, Mike wondered? Something that made Alex sound more disoriented still?

“Only me – Eleanor. And Mike’s here too. You’ve been calling out. Can we come in?”

Alex said something in response, but Mike couldn’t properly make it out, words strung together in a way which didn’t make much sense: *I thought you were already here*. Eleanor was already opening the door to Alex’s room and peering in.

“A nightmare?” Eleanor asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Alex murmured. As Eleanor moved into Alex’s room, long shadows cast by Mike’s lamp raced ahead of her, scuttling up the walls like bloated spiders. Mike followed her, trying to be unobtrusive – after all, it had not been him Alex had been calling for – but also ensuring that he was visible. Mike didn’t seriously entertain any thoughts about Alex being unstable or dangerous but some visible back-up would do no harm if the guy was susceptible to night-terrors.

Eleanor went to the chair, Alex snatching his torch out from under her before she sat.

“Wish I’d thought of bringing a torch,” Mike said. Depending for lighting on the flickering and hissing kerosene lamps in the dead of night felt half way to crazy.

“A torch was on the list of suggested items,” Alex replied, delivered in the tone found on automated phone services.

“Is there anything I can get for you – a glass of water – something else?” Eleanor asked. Mike wondered that she didn’t ask why Alex had been calling specifically for *her*. “Bad dreams?” Eleanor suggested again.

“Yes, some sort of nightmare,” Alex replied at length. The uncomfortable feeling Mike had that they were speaking to a machine became even stronger. Eleanor looked across at Mike quizzically.

“Something to drink would be nice, thank you,” Alex added eventually, bringing the conversation up to date. Mike volunteered himself to make them all a hot drink, leaving Eleanor and Alex to chat. Mike illuminated his path back towards the refectory, to find his island of light small in the large communal room. He walked over to the sink and his own face loomed in reflection within the windows above the worktops. He thought that the face he saw in the glass looked more than a little tired – he might even have said old. Without warning, a feeling of such utter despair and revulsion welled up that he had to take hold of the surface in front of him to stop himself reeling. The feeling grew until it threatened to become as huge as the night beyond, then ebbed again, a foetid tide that had turned as fast as it had arisen. Once gone, it was hardly possible to bring back a memory of what that feeling had been like, but it left behind a psychic bruise, always vulnerable, an area you would do anything to protect from another blow. Mike set to making tea, with hands that only barely shook.

*Chapter 11: Alex*

The next day, Alex awoke to the sound of muffled conversation from along the corridor. One of the voices was Eleanor’s and she was being very cheerful. Alex didn’t share those good spirits – in fact, the feelings he was experiencing were more like a hangover, complete with an unfocused but pervasive sense of guilt. After he had stayed in his bed for a while, he decided that if he didn’t rouse himself now, it would get increasingly difficult to go and face the other two. He checked his wristwatch, laid out on his table the previous evening, and was mildly surprised to see that it was not even eight o’clock – yet the sun outside was strong, brighter than Alex had seen in months. Despite the sunshine, the air was fresh and cool, raising goose bumps on the exposed flesh of Alex’s forearms, the gulls outside crying, urging him up, up to face the new day.

He went into the refectory as quietly as he could, but Eleanor heard him anyway and turned to greet him, grinning broadly.

“Good morning Alex, how are you today?” she said. “There’s fresh brewed coffee if you would like a mug.”

Alex nodded his head and made his way over to the steaming pot. “Thank you,” he said. “And thank you for last night, too.” He felt it was the right thing to say.

“For seeing if a friend needed help after a nightmare? I don’t need thanking for that.” She came over to place a hand on Alex’s forearm. “Had you been up late working on your computer? I heard you typing away last night. Before…your nightmare.”

“Not last night,” he said. “I didn’t have it on last night. Mathematicians do a lot of their best work…just thinking.”

Eleanor drew away and wiped her hands on a tea-towel with a barely noticeable frown. She turned and then said, more brightly: “Why don’t you tell me and Mike a bit more about the work you do? Would you be able to do that this morning?”

“I’ll get the laptop,” Alex said by way of a reply. When he returned, Mike was talking with Eleanor in a low voice. On seeing Alex, they stopped abruptly and stepped away from each other.

Eleanor beamed anew. “Alex is going to tell us more about what he does. With his computer,” she informed Mike with a friable enthusiasm.

“Sounds good to me,” said Mike. “I’ll get us a bit of breakfast first, if that’s OK?”

Alex flipped open the laptop and fired it up. As he made his explanations, a steady procession of cereal, toast and eventually bacon and eggs all arrived at intervals, although Alex appeared hardly aware.

“The program I have written uses a family of mathematical algorithms which examine data for patterns of information,” he began. Already, he could see a complex of colours in hues he associated with the program itself. He had the sensation of riding those soothing colours like a surfer, finding himself already calmer, in greater control.

“An algorithm?” Mike asked.

Alex swallowed a mouthful of breakfast. “An algorithm is a sort of mathematical rule or set of instructions. Lots of them existed already for the sort of thing I wanted to do, so I took them off the shelf to use – others I developed myself, which was the basis of my mathematical work. A procedure that would spot simple, regular features, and that could be very straightforward. Bright orange.” Alex didn’t notice a look of consternation cross both of his companions’ faces. He carried on in the same vein for a while, trying to put the maths into an accessible form. Exactly what Dr. Klein had recommended for the hypothetical wider audience which he was adamant that Alex needed. He didn’t notice the increasing references he was making to colours, and the other two largely chose to ignore them too, although they exchanged a few more bemused glances as he continued.

“How would it work in the real world?” Eleanor asked eventually. She hadn’t been following the explanations very closely. She caught Mike’s eye, and he raised an eyebrow fractionally, as if to say *Good question, Eleanor*.

“OK,” Alex took a deep breath. Outwardly calm, his heart began to pound steadily. “You can imagine some sort of program which recognised a load of possible patterns – in a series of numbers, for example – and then extrapolated to an unknown next step. If you had a boring series like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5….for example, the next number is…?”

“Six,” the other two said uncertainly, looking at each other again, for confirmation that if they were going wrong, they were at least going wrong together.

“Of course. Lots of programs would work that out, though. My program does the same sort of thing, but with much more complex data, and then makes predictions about what it is looking at – but whereas other predictive programs are super-specific in what they can recognise, mine will work with any data sets at all – it picks out any patterns. In anything.”

“OK,” said Mike. “I think I’m following so far.” Eleanor nodded her encouragement.

“This program *learns* – it can draw upon previous outcomes to inform future decisions – and the more information it gathers, the better it becomes at recognizing patterns. All sorts of patterns. When it’s working well, I see silver. Like a river of mercury.”

“When you say it learns – do you mean like a person? Like we learn?” said Eleanor, choosing to let the colour reference go for the moment.

“Better and faster than people,” Alex replied tersely. He could identify this newly arisen emotion accurately – it was the pride a craftsman feels in completing a great and intricate work.

“Can you give us a demo?” asked Mike. “I mean, if that’s OK with you. Don’t want you giving away industry secrets or anything.”

Alex nodded. He pressed a few keys and then gestured towards the machine. “Hum it a tune,” he said and Mike leant in. “No need to get too close.” Mike shifted back again.

“Anything?” said Mike.

Before Alex could answer, Eleanor hummed something. It was nothing Alex could recognise, but he had faith in the machine. An hourglass symbol appeared for a moment on the screen and then a message scrolled across: “Most probably *Ode to Joy* by Beethoven.”

“Most probably?” asked Eleanor. “That sounds very…human.”

“My supervisor suggested a more ‘natural’ interface – it can give much more precise responses. But anyway, was it *right*?”

Alex looked questioningly at Eleanor and she nodded her agreement. Mike went to say something more, but Alex held up a hand in a gesture that asked the other man to *wait*. He tapped in a few more commands, then shifted the machine around to face Mike more directly. The hourglass symbol reappeared for a few seconds, then blinked out.

Alex typed in a few commands, then turned back to Mike. “What’s your full name, date of birth?”

Mike hesitated, just for a moment. “Michael Simon Warner, twenty-first of September 1975.”

Alex typed that in. “Have you got a photo of yourself – driving licence, something like that?”

“Yeah, sure.” Eleanor wondered if she was detecting the slightest reluctance on Mike’s behalf, an unexpected and sudden unwillingness to engage with Alex’s wonder-machine. Even so, Mike disappeared into his room and came back with a passport open to his picture.

“Show the machine,” Alex instructed. “I’ll ask it who it thinks it is looking at.”

*Very high probability of Michael Simon Warner, born 21 / 09 / 1975*, the machine informed them.

Mike released a breath. “Impressive. Does it remember key features? Like facial recognition…?”

“Something like that – it compares information it has now with what it had in the past and comes up with a decision based on the best probability. It gets even better than that, though. It can recognise almost anything that it records, visually or by sound, based on a constantly evolving set of criteria. The more information to which the program has access, the better it gets at recognition of different patterns but it *can* work on very little hard information. That means that it can recognise a face as being a face, as being a person – but what makes this really special is that it can recognise patterns that it hasn’t experienced before. It can tell you if there *is* a pattern and *then* suggest what that pattern might be.”

Alex was feeling a sense of gratification approaching joy, a burst of pure, uncoloured emotion he had rarely experienced previously outside of being high. He was explaining what he did, and what his program could do, and doing it in a way which these people seemed to understand.

“It only knows what it’s been told though, right?” Mike asked. He was leaning closer to Alex now, almost *too* close. Eleanor glanced across at him. Some of the levity of the morning had evaporated away, and although she couldn’t pinpoint exactly when or exactly why, it had something to do with Mike’s sudden intensity.

“I don’t know what it knows,” Alex admitted. “It depends on the sort of question asked of it. One of the difficulties that the program presented was in finding a way to limit what it would research – earlier versions would chase down blind alleys, finding more and more about a specific subject by matching up increasingly esoteric bits of information. Now I just ask it to give a name, or a name and a date of birth if it looks at a person, for example. Otherwise it will start to dredge up all sorts of information.” Mike smiled uneasily.

“Where does it find all of that?” Eleanor leant further forward.

“Of course, it would usually be able to access the internet so would be learning at a geometric rate – at the moment it can only use the data it has stored or what I give it. The key is that it is flexible enough to recognise patterns in *any* data and can access any available information in order to learn.”

“So what can it be used for?” Eleanor asked.

“All sorts of things - decryption, for example.”

“Breaking codes.” Eleanor stated uncertainly.

“Exactly – and these days that can mean all the systems used to keep financial transactions secret, for example. The program can work through a huge amount of information, and produce probabilistic responses to find patterns in that information, getting rid of interpretations which are…less likely, let’s say. It can contextualise what it looks at, in the same way that we can, only much more quickly and drawing upon almost anything else in its immediate environment or online…”

When Alex looked up he saw over Mike’s shoulder out of the window the unmistakable figure of Bramley Haigh marching towards the chalet from the bay. “Haigh!” he said loudly. Eleanor thought for the briefest moment that Mike looked almost relieved.

*Chapter 12: Eleanor*

Eleanor secretly wondered if Alex’s machine and its workings amounted to anything more than a clever toy. She couldn’t see the use of recognising patterns in numbers but it was undoubtedly the first time she had seen something approaching real enthusiasm in Alex. The social awkwardness, the references to seeing ideas as colours – it all pointed towards someone with a complex of issues. She wondered if Alex had a girlfriend – now or ever – and decided not. With 99.9% probability.

Eleanor found that she was mildly irritated by Haigh’s reappearance. He only wanted to check that they had found everything, or so he said, and to go through anything they wanted to ask, but it threatened to spoil her plans to find out more about the others. Particularly Mike. His reaction to Alex’s explanation had been a little strange, she thought. Had Mike seemed a bit cool about the program? Disturbed, even? There was some work to do with Mister Michael Warner Eleanor decided.

Haigh made himself at home – it *was* his home, Eleanor had to tell herself – and began to rattle through yet another long list of do’s and don’ts.

After a while, she found that she had drifted away from the men, and back to the sink where she finished washing up. She tidied as best she could, and asked the others if there was anything she could get for them. They all seemed to have defaulted into a familial shape casting Eleanor, with a weary inevitability, as the Mum. The stereotype rankled with Eleanor, but only momentarily. In many ways she preferred not having to engage, having to look like she cared about everything Haigh told them.

“I’m going out for a walk,” she called to them although they barely glanced away from their instruction. Eleanor shrugged on her coat and pulled on her boots before going outside where she was immediately aware that the bright sunlight held a false promise of warmth; it was cold enough to make her consider returning inside to put on some more layers. She was only stopped by the thought that she would have to pass by the cabal of men again on her way back. Turning away from the chalet she decided to take the path to the top of the island, leaving the coastal walk for another time.

A minute or two later, she had climbed to a point above the roof level of the chalet to find that the winds were biting, despite the brilliant blue sky. She looked back at the building. She thought that she may have seen some movement, down by the work rooms. It had looked as if something small and close to the ground had crept along the wall, keeping alongside the building. Perhaps there was an animal on the island. Hadn’t Eleanor read somewhere not so long ago that deer sometimes crossed surprisingly long distances at sea, island-hopping their way to fresh pastures? The memory was strangely insubstantial, trying to capture it was like grasping at smoke.

She carried on up to the crest of the island, just before the track shrank to alarming narrowness. A few steps to the side, she sat down next to a rock, using its bulk to shelter from the wind, which howled relentlessly in from the sea. The protection was rough and ready but Eleanor felt secure there, so much so that she closed her eyes, relishing the sensations that flooded in with the visual temporarily gone. The air was so clean it had a taste, sweet and spiced. Not only could she hear the cries of birds that flew around her, she was aware of their wings beating in slow and steady pulses, then followed by a sharp *snap* as they made their hairpin turns.

When she opened her eyes again the light was different, subtly shifted. She realised with some little surprise that she must have slept. She checked her wristwatch - it was a few minutes before noon. If that were true she would have been asleep for nearly three hours, which seemed preposterous. Yet the deep ache in her limbs as she got to her feet supported the notion, as did a need to pee. She wondered if the others had noticed that she had been gone for so long, or if they were so wrapped up in whatever they had been talking about that they hadn’t even noticed she was gone at all. Eleanor leant against the stone, stretching out first one leg and then the other. She took a step forward and then froze.

The ground seemed to drop away much more precipitously than she remembered. Had she moved whilst asleep, rolled down towards the cliff edge? She allowed herself a quick backwards peek over the top of the rock and there was the path as she had remembered, only a few paces away, certainly no more than twenty. But to get back meant stepping forward first and the ground dipped immediately, the slope so steep that Eleanor saw no horizon except the sea. It was as if the island had been tipped forward whilst she slept, making her believe that at any moment her feet could be snatched out from under her and she would plummet helplessly onto the rocks below. She shuffled backwards, pressing into the monolith to anchor herself, and managed to dislodge a stream of tiny pebbles that chased after each other down the hill. Eleanor yelped, and involuntarily kicked loose a chunk of earth. It flew away from her, describing a great arc in the air as it fell. She felt the inexorable force of gravity, settling between her shoulders in its insatiable desire to drive her forwards. To let go, to step away, would be to surrender to that power and fall. The thought made her legs shake with fear, now adding to the exhaustion of straining against slipping further. Then the world seemed to lurch again so that pebbles and clumps of soil began to spill past Eleanor in an almost horizontal stream. Her fingers tried to dig themselves into the unyielding stone as her feet began to slide out from beneath her.

A breathless panic began to build: Eleanor knew that she had walked to this spot without any problem, that she had felt perfectly secure when she had come off the pathway to find some shelter earlier but now that she had formed the mental image of falling, the idea could not be dismissed. Everything else was illusion, she had to tell herself, her mind had to be brought under control or else she would risk sending *herself* spiralling over the cliff edge. Her breath came faster, ragged, with the rising panic so great that she felt that she might soon be screaming and running without thought of the consequence. She sat back down, heavily, and put her head between her legs to try to stem the dread. *There is no danger here*, she told herself sternly. *Nothing has changed except your perception.* She raised her head again, slowly and deliberately, to open her eyes and fix her gaze on the far distance where the sea met the sky. Fat grey clouds chased each other and seagulls wheeled out from the noonday sun. One bird dropped down closer to Eleanor.

The gull swooped in to draw level with her and then stopped to hover in the air, the tips of its wings flexing to keep it suspended. As the bird hung, it turned to look directly at her. She was sure – certain – that this was the same bird she had seen from the lounge window in the hotel. She recognised more than the physical aspects of the creature – she also recognized the malignancy of its gaze. Back in Oban she had been safely separated from it, as secure as a visitor watching animals in a zoo. Now, *she* was the one out of place, the one in the bird’s domain. Without warning it wheeled and swooped towards her, wings stretched wide and the hooked beak gaping.

*Chapter 13: Mike*

The three men walked together back to Haigh’s boat when he had left the island again – leaving them in charge now, he reminded Mike and Alex. Mike looked at his watch and was amazed to see how much time had passed. The sun was already beginning its downward trajectory into the West, sending shadows racing towards them over the land.

“I wonder where Eleanor has got to?” he wondered aloud.

Alex looked around, startled.

Mike tried again: “She said she was going for a walk but that was ages ago. Hours.” He turned to go back to the chalet. He resisted an urge which had come upon him to hurry, to *run*. Parallel stories began to take shape in his mind. According to the first, a woman goes missing on a city street: solution, call the police. In the second scenario, woman goes missing on an otherwise deserted Scottish island: solution…. well, that was the question, of course. What to do next? Mike tried to tell himself that there *was* no dilemma, at least not immediately. Eleanor wasn’t actually *missing* as yet, was she? At the moment she was only *unaccounted for*. Odds were that she would reappear at some point to tell them about an afternoon spent watching seals, or she was on her bed reading a book. But that wasn’t the point either. If this wasn’t an emergency, maybe next time would be or the time after that. So was there a plan?

Mike nearly tripped up the steps leading into the chalet. Without removing his outdoor clothing, he burst through into the living area, calling out to Eleanor. There was no reply so he went to check her room. He hammered on her door – too loud, he thought, it would only serve to spook her completely if she happened to be having a rest and he woke her up. Still no reply, so he opened her door and looked inside. Already, it was unmistakably Eleanor’s room; orderly, a paperback novel face down on her table – but the room was empty. Mike hurried back outdoors, where Alex waited.

“She’s not inside,” Mike said. “I’ll go and see if I can track her down. Maybe not such a good idea for any of us to wander off alone in the future.” Alex nodded agreement.

Mike trotted along the side of the building onto the track, hoping that he would look resolute rather than panicked.

Maybe Alex would think that given that there were only three of them, any pairing would have to leave one person on their own. But Mike was already thinking about *survival.* One person alone in the safety of the chalet was something which could be tolerated; being alone up on the top of the island or drifting singly along the shore seemed like an unnecessary risk. Shouldn’t that have been obvious to them before this situation developed? Wasn’t this exactly how tragedies unfolded, in a succession of poor assumptions? Mike set off, shouting to Eleanor as he went. Climbing a little further, it became obvious that calling out was pointless – the wind whipped away his words as soon as they were spoken. It was better just to climb on and keep an eye out for Eleanor as he ascended. Where the path forked, he paused. Haigh had told them quite categorically about the dangers of the cliff edge but had Eleanor been there for that bit of instruction? Had she lagged behind for a bit at that point, out of earshot, or had that been Alex? Mike found that he couldn’t remember. He paused for a moment at the junction and then then something decided him to set off on the upper path.

Mike looked amongst the rocks and in the crannies between, dreading that he would find an unmoving, broken form. All the time he tried to avoid thinking the obvious: he even avoided *looking* at the far cliff edge. Eventually, he couldn’t put off seeing any longer.

He crouched and moved forward cautiously, one hand to the ground at all times, conscious of the power that the wind possessed to rip him off his feet. He craned his neck to peer over at the rocks in the seas below.

Again, there was no body. He tried calling once again, in case she was stuck on a ledge somewhere just below his line of sight. He moved slowly backwards until well away from the edge before standing upright again. The ragged stones at the cliff edge were like broken teeth in a mouth, whispering *come closer, a little closer, why not lean right out and have a* proper *look*? Mike knew that it was unlikely that Eleanor was at the bottom of the cliff – but what if she was? What if she was and he walked away because he was too frightened to take a proper look over the edge? What if she was below and not dead, but hurt, badly hurt, and he could have saved her if he had acted quickly enough? The jagged grin ahead of him seemed to expand upon that idea. *What would it be like to* save *a life for a change*? Mike decided that he very much wanted to know the answer, so he edged forward once again.

*Chapter 14: Alex*

Alex struggled to keep up. He could see that Mike was upset (*or even* *annoyed*?) and he could link that, intellectually, with Eleanor’s absence. But in the time it took Alex to process all of that, and to double-check with himself that he was interpreting Mike’s behaviour correctly, Mike was already moving. The pace left Alex feeling unsettled, as if he had hopped off a fairground ride and the world continued to move around him. Flickering colours guttered in his mind’s eye like dying flames. Eleanor had been gone a while – but that in itself hardly suggested a problem. It would be different if this was midnight, but it was afternoon, albeit late in the day. She would most likely be enjoying a bit of solitary time and could hardly have gone far: they were on an island, after all. On the other hand, it seemed wrong not to join Mike’s search – it would look as if Alex didn’t care, and he did care. He liked Eleanor because she wanted to be kind to him, so he didn’t want anything to happen to her, because he knew it wasn’t good not to care about other people. Also, any major accident would almost certainly be most disruptive to his plans.

He deliberated for a moment or two, then decided to set off after Mike, who was already striding away, a tiny figure against the skyline. The maelstrom of trembling colours that swam in his imagination did not subside and that only added to his anxiety. As he moved, he tried to will the colours into a soothing river of smooth silver but without success.

*Chapter 15: Eleanor*

Eleanor’s breath was regular now, the spike of shock fading in intensity, the tightness in her chest slowly easing. The bird had veered past her and flown on to land on a skull-sized hummock of grass – a micro-environment, grown by a steady accumulation of bird shit over decades. It was a minor miracle in such a harsh environment. The bird – smaller, she now realized, than the giant she had seen in Oban – folded its legs beneath itself and settled. It kept an eye on Eleanor but it was nothing more than the natural vigilance of an animal in the wild.

Eleanor went to get up again and this time the ground beneath her feet remained solid. Very carefully, she craned her neck to look behind to where the pathway branched. She caught a glimpse of someone but she didn’t recognize the figure. It was too slight to be Mike – and even Alex was surely broader in the shoulder, taller? It was difficult to judge with nothing to lend a sense of scale. There was only the huge sky, against which anything would be small and insignificant. Also, her head was at an awkward angle and the wind was in her face, blurring her eyesight.

“Alex,” she shouted, with such force that the ember of fear in her chest began to throb angrily again. She had to turn away to take more deep breaths. When she looked once more, the figure had gone. Who could it have been? Haigh had said that others came onto the island from time to time, trespassers who were generally tolerated as long as they did no harm, so maybe it was an intruder wary of discovery.

“Alex?” she shrieked, this time even louder, enough to make her throat instantly raw. A scene swam into her imagination, fully-formed and perfect in its detail. She fancied that what she had glimpsed approaching would appear at her side offering a hand, which she would take as if in a dream. She would be lifted up gently but be brutally cast away to endure a few last awful moments of freefall before extinction. Later she might wonder where such terrible images were formed: gulls that held her in malefic contempt, strangers with intent to murder – but at that moment, Eleanor was simply caught in the reasonless grasp of horror.

She waited immobile for the vision to make itself material or for the world to lurch again and tip her out into space. Then a hand, small and dark as smoke, did reach around, and feeling slowly for purchase, groped towards her.

*Chapter 16: Alex*

Alex thought he heard a call. He guessed that Mike was far ahead of him by now and that therefore, it had to be Eleanor he had heard. He thought he saw someone bob out from behind one of the boulders, disappear behind another, then reappearing to stand motionless, though half obscured. The face – so pale as to be indistinct – seemed all wrong, the body too small. Then he heard his name shouted, carrying on the wind, cutting through the other restless noise.

“Alex!”

It was difficult to know exactly where the call had come from: Alex turned for a momentary glance behind him and when he looked back, there was no hunched figure, just the rocks and the constantly changing light.

“Eleanor, its Alex. Are you OK?”

There was no answer beyond the ceaseless shriek of the seabirds. He started to make his way back. Beneath his feet the ground was slippery. He stopped, not even wanting to breathe, and looked down. The surface appeared stable enough. An uncomfortable image formed: that the earth and stones he stood upon were paper-thin, an illusion he could step through like breaking a skim of ice on a fathoms-deep lake. He forced another breath and the image receded.

He tried shouting again. If Eleanor was sheltering nearby he didn’t want to startle her by suddenly appearing at her side. The slope was enough that if someone slipped or fell, he thought, there was a reasonable chance that they would keep going right over the cliff edge. Had it seemed so precipitous when they had last come this way? Alex couldn’t remember.

His own returning call didn’t seem to carry: lost in the wind, he supposed. Even to his own ears, his voice had a flat and lifeless quality to it, putting him in mind of a physics experiment he had once seen when the air was pumped out of a bell jar which contained an old fashioned ringing alarm clock. There had been something otherworldly about the way in which the sound had dwindled away and disappeared, and the final moments of the ringing bell had been just like his shouts – tiny, enfeebled, and out of kilter. Finally, the sound in that long-ago experiment was gone, although the clock kept vibrating, frantic but utterly mute. He felt sure that the air had been let back in at some point, restoring sound, but he could only remember seeing the clock, vibrating mutely under the dome.

He reached the place where he thought he had seen something and found that he had to edge around the outcrop, needing to move as carefully as if stepping onto the ledge around a tall building. Was it possible that Eleanor was unaware that she had put herself in such a precarious position? He flattened himself against the boulder as much as he was able, arms outstretched so far that his fingertips trembled against the surface of the stone. He found that he was imagining how this might look to someone watching from out at sea. Up above the cliffs of the island, they would see a man crucified.

Then Alex heard a screech, rising in pitch and volume. At first he thought the sound was rolling in off the sea, then a figure charged at him, hands curled into raised claws and a face twisted with rage.

Alex fell backwards and the creature fell with him, legs on either side of his chest. Alex felt the world twitch, like a sleeping dog, and then the screaming thing had crushed him against the ground, squeezing the breath from him. He lay still, too winded to move.

“Alex!” the figure screamed and he saw that it was Eleanor. Her hair writhed about her head in the wind, and her face was as grey as the far-away sea, but it was her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. Still astride Alex, Eleanor clapped one hand to her mouth.

Alex wanted to tell Eleanor that it was OK, that he had obviously surprised her, but there was still no breath for him to speak. Eleanor rolled away from him and then in a motion half stumble and half crawl, she moved away and up. Alex gulped air in desperate, grateful lungfuls. He could see that Eleanor was still talking, but the combination of the piercing wind, the calling of the rowdy gulls that continued their circling, and his own laboured breath made it impossible for Alex to hear more than a few disjointed words.

“Falling…,” he heard her say, and the very word made Alex’s head swim. “….the earth… I thought….the gulls….” Finally: “…thank you…”

For that moment, Alex could only lie and look up at the sky, where one particularly large seagull looped endlessly around, cold and inhuman eyes fixed constantly upon him.

*Chapter 17: Mike*

Mike had walked on, reaching the point where the path from the top of the island became a rough stairway. He stopped to take stock. Whichever way he looked the scene was almost identical, twin images of desolation. In both directions the beach was nothing more than an expanse of smooth pebbles, over which stood scattered skeletons of bleached wood. Interspersed amongst the stones were scraps of plastic, brittle and crisped by the action of the sea and sun. It occurred to Mike that this was the sort of detritus they were supposed to be tracking whilst on the island and he wondered for a bleak second or two if they would even get the chance to start. The sea swarmed up the beach, and fell back reluctantly, indigo in the failing light. There was nothing to suggest which direction might be more fruitful, so Mike tossed a mental coin, then set off to his right. It was only as he turned the corner that he realized that he may have unconsciously chosen this direction because it would take him under the area where the paths up above the cliff diverged. Perhaps he had been thinking that if Eleanor had fallen from the cliffs, her body would be lying there.

There was a patch of colour a few hundred yards down the beach, a pinkish mist that seemed to float above the surface of the stones. It suggested a pool of blood, slowly diluting in the waves. The thought made his stomach clench but he walked on. Even if it proved to be Eleanor’s broken body, he had seen worse.

As he approached, Mike saw that what he had thought was blood was only the remnants of a fine-mesh fishing net, rolling languidly in the water. He almost laughed aloud in relief, but there were memories of other times and of blood which boiled in flame, which strangled the laughter in his throat. Then he happened to glance landward and what he saw made his heart leap again.

At the top of a shallow slope of grit and shingle, the cliff face cracked open into an inky-black cave mouth. The opening was almost perfectly triangular, rising from its base to become a fissure running almost to the very top of the cliff, where it disappeared under wisps of grass, becoming a fracture which cleaved the body of the island.

Mike stepped towards the entrance, then stopped himself. Was it likely that Eleanor would have wandered into the utterly lightless cave? Or was he really wanting to do some ill-advised exploring himself, *sans* torch, *sans* backup, *sans* common-sense? Mike stepped back, telling himself that there would be time enough for exploration, that the priority now had to be finding their companion. Even so, the temptation had a physical intensity. *Come on in*, the gaping mouth invited, *nothing to hurt you in here* *– and aren’t you just* dying *to have a quick peek?* He decided that he should have a look – it was, after all, possible that Eleanor had given in to the very same temptation – and if she had, may have had an accident of some sort in the darkness.

Mike carried on up the beach. The pebbles rolled beneath his feet, making walking hard work. On reaching the entrance, he half-expected the Stygian darkness to have softened a little. But, at the mouth of the cave fell a curtain of blackest night, so absolute that Mike had to stand before it and stare. He wanted to stretch out a hand to dip his fingers into the darkness, deciding that it would feel like immersion in thick, cool tar. But he didn’t stretch out a hand, he simply carried on gazing into the featureless dark. The ceaseless noise of the island, the rhythmic hiss of the sea and the screaming of the gulls, all dulled. There became nothing to see but the unchanging midnight black, and nothing to hear except a silence that went beyond an absence of noise.

He saw himself as he might appear from inside the cavern, silhouetted against the cave mouth. Anything that existed in that cave would surely hate the world of sunlight, he thought, and with that a draft of air moved against his cheek so that he caught the faintest trace of an old and pungent reek. He imagined that something in the depths - some not-quite unforgotten thing – might be crawling with painful deliberation towards him, hand-over-hand.

Something that waited with horrible patience.

Something that putrefied but did not die.

Something that, even as he stood and looked unseeing into darkness, crept ever closer, and now reached out for him, hunger brightening its dead eyes.

Mike abruptly took a step away. Yet, nothing dropped out of the cave and the smell was only seaweed, slowly decomposing with the heady musk of beaches the world over.

“Eleanor?” he called again. Inside the cave, the call reverberated without vitality. Mike had to admit that Eleanor might be in there, possibly hurt but he couldn’t bring himself to set foot into that implacably dark maw. He was certain that walking away was the sane thing to do. Still he waited, and watched. Around him, the light dulled to burnished gold which swept temporarily across the sky before deepening further into twilight while Mike continued to stare into the abyss.

*Chapter 18: Eleanor, Alex and Mike*

When Mike eventually arrived back at their chalet, he could see from the variety of boots jumbled outside the front door that Eleanor had been found. He must have stood for a time outside the cave, he decided, but he had no memory of being there – or, rather, his memory floated in wisps and fragments, like dreams roughly scoured by a new morning. At one of the huge dining tables, Eleanor and Alex sat with mugs of tea.

“Have you been back long?” asked Mike. He felt an old and unwelcome anger rising but kept his tone measured, his voice light. He busied himself taking off the top layer of clothing, ducking his head so that the other two did not see the clench in his jaw.

“We nearly sent a search party out for *you*,” Alex said with what Mike couldn’t help feeling was a trace of censure. “It’s late.”

“It can only be…,” Mike looked at his watch and his eyes opened wide. He had been gone for a very long time – a *ridiculously* long time. As he struggled to make sense of where he had been and what could have happened to him in all that lost time, his previous irritation stripped away. He looked back to the others, trying to cover his shock: “When did you two get back?”

“Alex rescued me,” Eleanor told Mike, a pink flush rising on her cheeks. She glanced over at Alex.

“Not really,” said Alex, matter-of-fact as ever.

Eleanor shook her head. “He *did*,” she affirmed.

“I found her resting behind a rock,” Alex said, in a way which suggested that this was as much information as was needed. “But where have *you* been?”

Mike started to say that he had been looking for Eleanor, that the search had taken him virtually around the entire island – but that wasn’t quite true, and he had the strongest feeling that the other two would know, call him out on the lie. Yet, even as he hesitated, he tried to bring to mind what *had* happened and found that the memories were fading like old photographs.

“Are you OK?” Eleanor asked. She was already up out of her seat and halfway towards Mike.

He shook his head. “Yes, fine,” he said. In response to a look on Eleanor’s face which said that she didn’t think that he looked so fine, he added: “Really.” She gave a small shrug, as if to say *Have it your way.*

“So, where *did* you get to?” Alex pressed the question.

“There was a cave, under the cliff. I…I had a look in there, just in case…somebody…was in there.”

“Haigh mentioned the caves when he took us on the tour, didn’t he?” Eleanor said. “Did you actually go in?”

Mike intended a laugh, but only managed to produce a snort that held very little mirth. “Too dark,” he said. “There was very little to see, anyway…”

“How do you know?” asked Alex suddenly. “I mean if it was too dark to see anything…?”

Mike looked confused. “As I said, it was too dark to go in very far.”

“If you didn’t go in very far and it was too dark to see anything anyway, how do you know that there was nothing to see? Maybe there was something that you didn’t actually get to see *because* it was too dark?”

Eleanor felt an occult signal crackle between the two men, carried on an aether of purest testosterone. Mike bristled visibly, whilst Alex maintained a potentially infuriating calm.

“Mike means that he didn’t see anything immediately and that there was nothing to make him want to explore any further,” Eleanor explained. “Is that what you mean, Mike?”

“Something like that,” Mike allowed. Alex maintained his steady gaze on Mike.

They sat a while longer, mostly in silence, until eventually Alex returned to his room, telling the others that we would do some more work. Already, nightfall was folding itself in over the island, the wind blowing in from across the sea lending the air a density which presaged storm.

“Is there something wrong with him?” Mike asked Eleanor, tilting his head towards the doorway to indicate Alex. He deliberately spoke a little too loudly, Eleanor decided, as if hoping that Alex might overhear. That would be very unkind, Eleanor considered, and her opinion of Mike shifted, subtly and slightly, but conclusively.

“Nothing *wrong* exactly…I’ve come across young people like him before.” She leant forward across the table, and even in the rapidly gathering gloom, her eyes sparkled. “High-end autism,” she whispered. “Fantastic with logic and maths, not so good with emotions or getting on with people. It means that he says things most of us would consider rude, because he can’t put himself in other people’s shoes. Or he keeps eye contact for just a bit too long. Or not at all. Things we do automatically, he has to think about, come to a decision.” She smiled and in that moment her features softened, so that Mike had to grin back in return.

“I’m guessing you could see that I was getting…”

“Annoyed? Yes, I could see. But I’m afraid that sometimes autistic people can be like that – they don’t realise how frustrating they are being until – *bang*! Everything blows up, leaving them wondering what they said or did to cause so much trouble. It’s hard for them.”

“I guess knowing a bit about it and meeting someone who’s living with it are two different things.” Mike said. “I’ve read that there is a spectrum and I suppose that our friend Alex is at the genius end. I also get that I need to make allowances. We’re not used to people just sitting there and staring, it can come across as pretty rude. Confrontational, even.”

“Yes, it must…it *does* come across that way. But Mike, you looked…I would have to say *angry*, when we were talking about the cave. Didyou see anything there?”

Mike hesitated, reluctant to get caught in an out-and-out lie, but at the same time finding it difficult to tell the truth – and what *was* the truth, exactly? It could only amount to saying that he honestly had little idea what had happened, apart from getting a bit spooked, perhaps. That and the little matter of a few missing hours. He remembered standing and looking into the cave, the ever-present sound of the ocean all around, then…nothing. Or, rather, there *was* something but recollection melted away when he turned his attention on it, like trying to shine a light on a shadow.

“There was nothing there that could hurt us,” he said eventually.

*Chapter 19: Alex*

In the days that followed, Alex tried hard to remember the advice given to him about dealing with others. Mrs Neville – who reminded him of Eleanor in many ways – gave him all sorts of scripts to follow, but as he grew up things proved to be more complex than they ever had been at school. At least then it was fairly obvious who did and didn’t like him: those who didn’t were in the habit of telling Alex as much. Not so in the adult world, where people mostly smiled and were more-or-less polite to his face, but whose smiles could subtly change into cruel smirks, the stretched grins of sharks. So he decided as soon as they had set foot on the island that although he should try to get some work done, he would also set aside half-hourly breaks during which he would socialise with Mike and Eleanor. That way they wouldn’t think him ‘stuck-up’, a state of affairs which the erstwhile Mrs Neville warned against almost more than any other. A few days passed before Mike suggested that perhaps they should go on an inspection of the exterior of the building, to which Alex agreed. After all, that was one of the reasons they were there in the first place.

In their first days together, Eleanor had produced the best food of the three, but Alex had surprised himself by following recipes which produced some more than passable meals, at least according to his housemates. They had tried out the two-way radio set, checking in with the coastguards who promised that they would swing by at some point to pay them a visit. They had also contacted the skipper of a fishing boat, who told them in passing that his boat was on a mirror flat sea as they spoke. At that moment on the island, the rain had been pelting, the incongruity causing all three of them to turn and look out of the window in a synchronised action which made them all burst out laughing.

Alex had tried to get his work done during the daylight hours in case typing on the laptop keyboard annoyed the others (*though how loud was it, really?* he had to ask himself.) On the first night they had spent on the island, Mike and Eleanor had seemed to get a bit agitated, Alex thought, at the very thought of him working in the night, so he decided not to risk antagonizing them. Not that Eleanor seemed inclined to follow his considerate lead – he heard her voice every night, a high treble whispering through the building when the night fell still. He never managed to make out what she was saying. He wondered if she was sleep-talking, which would account for the fact that the babble continued without interruption. The condition was perhaps not so uncommon, Alex thought, but nonetheless the cadences of these nightly conversations didn’t seem to fit entirely with Eleanor being a sleep-talker; whatever she was saying sounded too nuanced, too emotive to be delivered in sleep.

Alex had not discussed the incident on the cliff with Eleanor at any great length; certainly not with Mike. Already it seemed like the remnants of a bad dream, when upon wakening, all that is left is an uncomfortable feeling that there is something out of place. The one time he had made a half-hearted attempt to bring the topic up with Eleanor it had left her uncharacteristically silent, so it seemed best to let whatever memories there were remain buried. Mike also kept his own counsel when it came to what he may have discovered in the caves and Alex, in as much as he thought about it at all, accepted these silences as a part of the greater mysteries perpetrated by the rest of humanity.

As they kitted themselves out for the inspection walk, Alex asked if they would be taking the coastal route, which would have taken them past the caves.

“No buildings there for us to inspect,” Mike explained. “Perhaps we could go and explore the caves one day, if things stay quiet. Not that there’s much to see.” Alex, for all his lack of empathy, had nonetheless developed a fairly reliable bullshit detector and it was now registering off the scale. He glanced over at Eleanor but she was intent on pulling on her boots, her brow furrowed in concentration.

As was usual, Mike ended up in front leading the party while Alex found himself at the back, allowing a gap to open up between himself and the others. Mike and Eleanor had turned the corner by the stores when, through the window, Alex saw a movement inside. He stopped and peered in, cupping his hands to his eyes. The glass was grimed with dust, so it was like staring into fog. Just as he was sure that it had been his imagination, there was another shift in the shadows. Alex opened the door and stepped inside. The storeroom had the expectant air of a room just vacated, trembling with potentiality. Even so, all was still, and if anything moved, it did so just beyond the periphery of his vision.

“See you later,” Alex said to no-one in particular, shutting the door on his way back outside. He hurried after Mike and Eleanor, catching up with them a little way up the path, where they both stood looking back towards the roof of the main building.

“Do you think it looks the same?” Mike asked as Alex approached.

For a moment, Alex wasn’t quite sure what he was being asked.

“The roof,” Mike pressed. “Do you think it looks OK? Like it was the first time you saw it?”

Alex looked intently, trying to be sure. It *did* seem to be a bit more *twisted*, in some barely definable way, as if given a sly pinch by a passing giant.

“Can’t say,” Alex said eventually. “Do you think we should take a closer look?” As soon as he had spoken he realised that he was deferring to Mike again, reinforcing the unspoken notion that Mike was in charge. Alex could see that it wasn’t so much that Mike stepped *forward* for the role of leader, it was more that other people tended to move aside for him. *Cream rises*, Alex’s father had a habit of saying, although he would go on to add: *but so does scum*.

“I’ll get a ladder,” Mike said. While someone like Alex dithered about thinking about what they should do, men like Mike just acted. *Deeds Not Words* was his old school motto. Even as Alex pondered this lesson, Mike was reappearing with one of the extendable ladders and Alex realised with a sort of resigned wonderment that he had been wool-gathering again while Mike just got on with it, exemplifying that proactive instruction from his schooldays. They moved back down the path to the foot of the wall.

Mike set the ladder up and Alex decided that he would act first this time, so simply walked over and began to climb. “Hold it steady for me would you?” he asked Mike.

“Sure,” Mike fired back, and didn’t Alex detect just a smidgeon of surprise in his tone?

Once up at roof level, Alex could see no obvious damage. He climbed up a little further and stepped off onto the roof itself, a flat section that covered the food store. Gusts of wind blew surprisingly stronger up there, so that he had to hunch over to lower his centre of gravity. The roof was covered in wide sheets of material with the unpleasant texture of sticky sandpaper and after a minute or so Alex saw that one of the sheets had worked itself loose, one corner rising up by a couple of inches. It had to be this, he thought, which gave the impression that the roof had warped. He returned to the top of the ladder to shout the details of his discovery down to Mike.

“We’ll need to batten that down,” Mike instructed, as if the idea wouldn’t have occurred to Alex. “Do you need me to come up?”

“I’ll be fine,” said Alex, utterly certain that he would be able to fix the roof without Mike’s help, although he would admit it was not a confidence born of experience.

“What do you need?”

“Just a few good length nails and a hammer,” Alex guessed. Alex half expected Mike to laugh and say that nails would be no good and to offer a solution simultaneously more complex and more obvious, something more inarguably *workman-like*, but he didn’t. Instead, Mike simply asked Eleanor to take over holding the ladder so that he could go off in search of the tools.

With a minute or two to kill, Alex sat on his haunches and looked out over what he thought of as the back half of the island. The skies which had been so blue when they had first arrived were becoming muddier, even over the last couple of days, taking on the dirty colour of soiled water, and the cries of the seabirds became more forlorn. From where he sat Alex couldn’t see Eleanor at the foot of the ladder so it was easy to pretend that he was alone. He breathed air clean enough to make his lungs sting and let his gaze range over the landscape.

On the great mound of earth that rose up behind their living quarters, there were many splintered rocks, ink-dark pools formed where no sunlight penetrated but what Alex saw moved between those lightless basins, stepping with care, like an old man or a badly constructed bonfire-night Guy come to life. Alex couldn’t be sure, at this range, exactly what he was looking at – maybe an old man, or possibly a child.

“Look!” he shouted, standing up. He moved as quickly as he could, half-crouching, half running, to the top of the ladder.

Eleanor’s face stared up at him from below, a startled moon with wide open eyes and mouth. “What is it?” she asked, her voice tiny.

“Up on the hill, there’s someone there!” Alex was shouting and pointing, and Eleanor, looking puzzled, turned to look. As she twisted away, she released her grasp on the ladder, as Alex went to step down onto the top rungs.

He felt the ladder slide sideways beneath him, slowly at first, then faster, too quickly now for any lucid thought, for any decision to step back, and he heard Eleanor cry a warning, too late. He turned as he fell, so that the last thing he saw before the ground roughly hugged him into unconsciousness was a tenebrous figure standing between two great boulders in the hillside, watching.

*Chapter 20: Eleanor*

Alex had come to the top of the ladder and had been shouting something, and although the sense had been lost to Eleanor, he had also pointed frantically towards the area behind her. Then, as she had turned to look, he had tried to come down. She saw it all from the very corner of her vision, a slow-motion disaster as the ladder toppled, followed by Alex himself, bent in a tangle of limbs as he fell too. Eleanor had made a futile grab for the ladder, half-aware even then that snatching hold would not be such a good idea. Then one of Alex’s flailing feet caught her on the side of her face and knocked her to the ground as well. She heard the ladder go down, and Alex land on top of it with a crash like a cracked bell. Then Eleanor’s world became sepia.

When she began to come around, Mike was there on his knees bending over a pile of crumpled clothing. She gently shook her head, slowly resolving the heap into Alex. Eleanor turned her head a little more to get a better view and squeaked with pain as something popped in her neck.

A huge horror swelled in Eleanor, a fear so large that it stuck in her throat, threatening to choke her. She wanted to ask Mike if Alex was alright (*was he* *dead?*) but her breath had regressed to a voiceless rasp. She could only watch as Mike tended to Alex until, dimly, she became aware that Mike was talking to her.

“Eleanor? Eleanor?” Mike repeated.

Still she couldn’t speak, but found enough breath to grunt.

“I’ll be with you in a minute; I’ll look after Alex first in case...”

She grunted again. She understood the principles of triage.

Mike answered the question Eleanor had not been able to ask: “I think he’s OK,” he told her. “He’s breathing and he’s conscious.” It was what she needed to hear and with that her brutal anxiety began to subsume allowing her to find her voice again.

“Anything broken?” she managed to ask.

“I don’t think so,” Mike told her. Still on his knees, he turned to look at Eleanor for the first time. “Don’t get up, stay still and I’ll have a look at you when I’m done with Alex.”

“Are you sure he’s awake?” she asked.

“Yes. I think so. He’s barely responding though.” Mike, usually so self-assured and competent, had a tinge of panic in his voice, Eleanor detected. It was a flash of insecurity that, despite the situation, she found a little bit appealing. Not heeding his advice she hoisted herself up on one elbow to get a better look at the two of them. There was no agonizing pain as she moved so she assumed that all her bones were intact. She couldn’t imagine that Alex had been as fortunate – she had essentially just fallen over whereas he had plunged off a roof and landed on top of a ladder. That kind of accident demanded a price.

Then Alex sat up too, talking at a machine-gun rate. Mike pulled back, startled. Alex was gesturing at the hill beyond, saying something barely coherent about what he had seen there. Alex sprang to his feet and before Mike could say or do anything more, Alex had set off to march up the path.

“Seems OK,” Eleanor said.

Mike nodded. “Physically, at least. Let’s see what’s got him so worked up that falling off a building doesn’t faze him, shall we?”

Eleanor got to her feet, and moving with exaggerated care, followed the two men up the path.

*Chapter 21: Mike*

They found nothing when they had caught up with Alex, no trace of anyone else but Mike decided to search further after Eleanor coaxed Alex back to the chalet. Mike had carried on until the day faded, trying to tell himself that it was the job he had contracted to do. More than that, though; Alex’s story had made him uneasy. There was a feeling of security in thinking themselves the sole inhabitants of the island, the thought that there might be some unknown fourth person prowling about was disquieting. From the island’s highest points, he could see no boats which might have ferried unwelcome visitors, no obvious traces.

Mike eventually returned, moving carefully through the deepening gloom in order to make his report. Back at the chalet, he found Alex calmer but still insistent that he had seen someone amongst the rocks.

“I saw something too, I thought at the time that it was maybe an animal,” Eleanor said. “Not so sure now.”

“So we’re thinking that there could be someone else here?” Mike didn’t try to hide the scepticism in his voice.

Alex and Eleanor looked at each other for a long moment. “I don’t know,” Eleanor admitted. “I do think that we should have a contingency though. In case we’re not alone.”

“Then we need to talk about that,” Mike said.

The night swept in at its galloping pace and they discussed their options until Alex announced that he was going to bed. He asked, sheepishly, if they would keep the noise down tonight as he needed to get a decent sleep. Mike glanced towards Eleanor, who shook her head gently.

“Do you think he ought to be sleeping?” Eleanor whispered. “Contra-indicated when you suspect concussion…”

“I don’t think he’s concussed,” Mike said bluntly. “Might still want to check in on him at some point in the night. Just to be sure...”

“I’m happy to do that,” Eleanor interrupted. Again, Mike saw a curious but unmistakable fervour sparkle in her eyes.

“If you’re sure. Though it might be better for the two of us to pop in on him together. Second opinion and all that.”

Eleanor smiled. “I’m quite sure. If I need a second opinion I’ll wake you up. I know where you’ll be, after all.”

A few minutes later, Eleanor too was gone, leaving Mike alone. There was no question of going to bed just yet – the day had clearly exhausted the other two, but he experienced something that was almost opposite to that: it was as if a key had been inserted and started an engine that now thrummed within him, filling him with a heady sense of potential. Yet with no obvious outlet for all this newly emergent energy, he focussed on keeping himself busy instead. Making more tea would mean clattering about in the kitchen and he didn’t want to disturb the others so he picked up some of the tattered magazines which were heaped by the sofas, reading material for the island’s now-vanished visitors. The words just slid off the surface of his mind, like water from a sheen of oil, and he found himself drifting back into his memories.

The darkness outside became an obsidian mirror in which Mike fancied that he could see his past unfold, flickering like an ancient movie reel stuttering into life. As always, the first thing he saw was the roadway, the white lines disappearing under the wheels of the car in regular procession, steadily marking the yards and miles. To each side of the roadway shapes grew, coalesced briefly into identifiable objects – a tree; a lamppost – before being carried away in the slipstream and forgotten. Even in his imagination, Mike felt the soporific pull of these pulsing, alluring patterns.

No matter whether or not he had ever had as much as a single drink, no matter if he had just left a lunch party, even if having stayed an hour (or two) longer than he had meant, anyone would start to feel drowsy after long days of work and long evenings in enjoying, wouldn’t they? Who wouldn’t be lulled by the warmth in the car and by its gentle rocking motion? And what if he *had* enjoyed a glass of wine more than he had intended? It was an accident and it would have happened whether he had taken another drink or not, wasn’t that the truth?

Even so, it would be sensible to open the window a crack, let in some cool air. Winter outside was suspended in a brief interlude between snowfalls. Christmas was around the corner, a week, ten days away, not long, but long enough for lives to be changed forever.

Then the car window *was* open a little, causing a startlingly cold breeze to blow in. Yet still the hypnotic rhythms continued. He decided that he needed some music, reached across to the controls dashboard. It was never the easiest thing to manage, though, the touch-screen needing to be stroked rather than poked, so that Mike’s attention was entirely on the machine, hoping that he could find one of the tracks he really liked, some proper driving music, when….

There was a scream, jerking Mike back into the present. An enormous relief washed through him, the sense of having avoided, by the skin of his teeth, some awful catastrophe. Following immediately was the crushing realization that the disaster had never been avoided at all. All that he put aside with the mental equivalent of hoisting a massive weight. It was Eleanor who had cried out. He rushed through the refectory to the corridor. She was already stood at the entrance to her room, looking to him with wide eyes.

“What’s the matter, what’s happened?”

Eleanor waved him back, into the dining area.

She leant into Mike as she closed the connecting door, speaking quietly into his ear. Dark thoughts, like startled birds flocking into the air, exploded in Mike’s still sleep-fogged mind. He forced himself to concentrate on what he was being told until the feelings subsided.

Up close, Eleanor looked older than her years, with her hair dishevelled and her cheap nightgown wrinkled. One of her hands was hooked on Mike’s upper arm and he had to resist a strong urge to pull away.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said. “Alex was typing away, clatter, clatter, clatter. It was driving me mad but I didn’t want to say anything, not after the day he’s had. Then I did get to sleep but there was something in my room, Mike, it woke me up…” The words came in a torrent.

“I didn’t hear Alex,” Mike replied. “Perhaps you were dreaming …”

“You aren’t the one next door to him!” she hissed, with a fierce insistence that might have kindled Mike’s anger under different circumstances.

“What did you hear?” he asked. “Was it a man?” He was thinking about Alex’s mystery intruder. It wasn’t at all difficult to imagine that someone so minded could just walk right in to their building. The doors had no locks.

“I don’t know.” She looked fearful. “No, I don’t think it was a person.”

“Well, did you see whatever it was?”

She shook her head. “Heard it,” she whispered.

“Let’s have a look,” he said. Eleanor hesitated but fell in step behind him, a hand tight on his elbow.

Mike grabbed one of the lanterns which still burnt in the kitchen. Eleanor stayed back at the doorway, as Mike swept along the corridor and stared into her room.

He expected there to be nothing there, even if there had *been* something – a mouse, or a shrew. Haigh had warned them that these little creatures infested the island and would attempt to invade the stores. Then there was movement, where the head of the bed fitted into the corner of the room so Mike brought the lantern around to get a better view. The shadow was not banished by the light, but merely shrank into the angles of the walls. He didn’t move, but even so the umbra began to grow, stretching like soft toffee across the floor towards him. He had the definite feeling that there *was* something in the room, a presence as yet invisible but approaching ever nearer, becoming more solid. He imagined that presence condensing out of the air in front of him, so close that he would feel cold breath on his cheek, and smelling…his first thought had been of the sea, but that had been supplanted by a memory of thick, choking smoke, with the reek of burning oil not-quite masking another, even more awful stench. Suddenly, he *did* smell something, part rot, part roasted meat. All at once he felt the space press down on him irrevocably and almost without thinking he began to shuffle backwards out of Eleanor’s room. He needed to get out, quickly, but had no wish to turn his back on what could materialize.

The lantern hissed and the deep shadow sprang towards him again. He realized, too late, that his lantern was fading, before perfect darkness fell like a thick curtain around him and he was left holding only a tiny red ember of light which faded in abrupt gasps. Just before the light was gone completely, he thought that he saw two glints, as of reflections in eyes.

*Chapter 22: Alex*

Alex had slept, probably better than at any time since first arriving on the island, and for the first time had not been kept awake by Eleanor’s night-time ramblings. He was woken by a cry, but instead of alarm, he felt only resigned annoyance and decided that he would ignore it, go back to sleep. Mike would undoubtedly do his knight on white charger bit and go to the rescue, Eleanor would cluck and fuss. He listened to their subdued voices, after which there was some unidentifiable fumbling in Eleanor’s room, followed by what sounded like a hasty exit. At the same time, the pale line of light which appeared under the door had reduced from buttery yellow to insipid pink, before disappearing completely. He guessed that their lantern had run out of fuel. Alex considered offering the use of his torch – but that would mean getting up and as he had already determined, he was quite content to stay in bed, to allow the drama next door play out in his absence.

Eleanor whispered something close by and he tried to ignore it, to let sleep wash in like the distant tumbling of the sea on the shore. Suddenly, he was fully awake and sitting up in his bed, the gooseflesh creeping all over. He knew that Eleanor was out in the corridor – he had heard her voice, kept low, but identifiably her. *So what had just spoken against his ear?*

He heard the murmur again, this time so close that it stirred his hair and, of course, this was not Eleanor, it had never really sounded like her.

“Not Eleanor,” the little voice agreed and this time it was Alex who screamed.

*Chapter 23: Eleanor*

The night had erupted into action, first with Mike and Eleanor scrambling out of her room by the light of the dying lamp, then Alex crashing from *his* room, shouting something incoherent about Eleanor (or maybe he was shouting *at* Eleanor). They moved as one into the living area, all talking at once.

“What was that, Mike? What did we see in there?”

“There was someone in my room, I heard them…”

“Let’s keep calm, try to think about this.”

Suddenly Mike stopped talking and stood, with his arms outstretched and his head down. When he looked up again, he was smiling.

“I think we have all got more than a little agitated tonight. Perhaps we’re all on edge, after the accident and everything. Eleanor and I saw a mouse or a shrew – Haigh told us they would get everywhere. We’ll need to put some traps down.”

Eleanor went to say something but Mike carried on.

“I’m sure it doesn’t sit well with you – with any of us – but we can’t let the food stores become contaminated.”

“OK, you’re probably right,” Eleanor said quietly.

“Alex,” Mike said, making Alex start. “You say that you heard someone in your room?”

“I thought it was Eleanor but…”

“She was with me, in the corridor, so she certainly wasn’t in your room. But maybe her voice carried somehow, made you think it *was* her.”

Alex tried again: “I *thought* it was her but it wasn’t…”

Mike cut across him for a second time. “So you saw someone else?”

“No, not exactly, but I thought they told me that they weren’t Eleanor,” Alex said hesitantly.

“Sounds more like the remnants of a dream. No-one breaks in just to tell people that they aren’t someone else. Think about it.” Mike spread his hands in a gesture that seemed to say: *Believe me! Aren’t I persuasive?*

“It makes sense,” Alex allowed and as he mulled over this solution, Eleanor could see a little of the night’s tension begin to drain from him.

Eleanor didn’t want to contradict Mike: she had an uncomfortable sense that there was pent-up anger buried not very deep, which she didn’t want to be digging up. Even so, the two men seemed to be wilfully ignoring certain – let’s call them *unsettling* - aspects of their experience. She steeled herself to tell them as much.

“We can’t explain all of this away, can we? What you saw on the roof, Alex; what I felt up at the top of the cliff…have *you* seen anything, Mike? Anything out of the ordinary?”

Eleanor thought that she saw Mike flush pink but the illumination cast by the guttering lamps gave everything a roseate glow. She couldn’t be sure.

“Apart from all this tonight…” Mike threw open his arms to take in the scene. “Not really, no.”

To Eleanor the surreal chaos of events seemed to be parts of a whole, a current that swept them from one incident to another, underlain by an unease which ebbed and flowed in its intensity but was always present. Yet when that tide was out, when that disquiet (although *fear* was not too strong a word, Eleanor decided) receded into the background, the island was more than just pretty scenery – it was charmed; she might almost say a genuine phenomenon. Most of Eleanor’s life had been antithetical to wonder, she knew, but she believed that she might come to love this special place. Merely to think of the island made her feel light enough to float. If it had a darker side too – well, didn’t that just add to the appeal? And it was very possible, Eleanor told herself, to be scared but to love the object of your dread.

“I wonder if my unsettled nights are simply down to being in such a different environment. Only that,” Alex suggested. He was staring out of the window as he spoke, gazing into the fathomless night.

Eleanor seized on Alex’s admission. “I think that’s true for us all,” she said. “We’ve underestimated how different life is on the island – and that has been a mistake, it’s even put us in danger. We need to start taking precautions – serious precautions – to keep ourselves safe. Physically and mentally. We’ve managed to scare ourselves silly after only a few days; give it a whole winter and we could go full cabin fever crazy.”

“I think you’re right,” Mike declared. He sat up, a weight of authority resettling into his bearing. “First thing tomorrow, we sort out some rules about how we move around, what we do if there is a problem. Perhaps we need to take everything more slowly – look out for each other. There’s no one else to do it.”

That seemed to signal an end to the discussion. They all drifted back to their own rooms, where each of them lay silently in the darkness, straining to hear whatever might be carried on the wind, until the dawn crept into the sky.

In the days that passed there was discussion about whether Alex should see a doctor. In the end the two men had taken the boat and made the journey to get him checked over, back in Oban, making use of the postal taxi service. They were gone most of the day and for Eleanor, there was an intoxicating sense of freedom to be finally, completely alone. Alex had been fine, as it turned out, but they returned to their work more cautious, with a greater respect for their environment, exactly as Mike had proposed. Together, they decided that whatever it was that had been in Eleanor’s room was most likely a little critter looking for an easy meal which had somehow got lost between the outdoors and the stores. When Eleanor had some time to properly reflect on it all, she realised that she *had* seen a few little creatures scuttling away from her through the grass when out walking but the traps they had reluctantly set in the stores remained empty.

If Alex’s sleep continued to be disturbed he didn’t let the others know, and if he sometimes looked less than refreshed in the mornings then neither Mike nor Eleanor made any comment on that. Their chores were light and they passed their free time in walking, sometimes individually on what they agreed to be the safer routes, more often in a pair, leaving one behind in the building. They tended to carry out their inspections of the coasts together, unhurriedly beachcombing, mostly in easy silence. Conversations seemed to happen almost in slow motion, topics picked up from where they left off, hours or even days before. Mike and Alex found a shared interest in piloting the boat and took semi-regular trips across the sound, ostensibly to gather supplies, although Eleanor suspected it was mostly for the sheer joy of being out on the water. Even so, she would have had to admit they did become quite proficient as helming the boat, day or night.

Eventually it was suggested that they might all enjoy a trip to the pub on the mainland. The suggestion came as a surprise to Eleanor and her first reaction was to decline. After all, there was everything they needed on the island and she saw no need for additional company.

“What if something happens? Shouldn’t someone be here?”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Mike told her. “The weather looks OK for a least the next few days and I don’t think anyone will make a special trip for a smash and grab raid here.” He gestured around him to take in their surroundings. Eleanor had to agree that it made an unlikely target for opportunistic thieves.

“Don’t forget that this place used to be mothballed all winter,” Alex reminded them. “It would take a storm to cause real problems.”

“There you go - what if the weather turns?” she said. “Never mind what happens to the island. We might get stuck on the mainland.”

“Don’t worry. Like I say, the forecast is fine – even if we did get stuck over there, I’m sure the island would survive a night without us, and we’d be able to hole up in the pub.” Out on the fringes of the world, they had come to invest an almost religious faith in the weather forecast.

Eventually Eleanor agreed that an outing to the mainland might be fun, even found herself looking forward to it. On the night before their trip, she found herself airily wondering what she was going to wear, as if she possessed a wardrobe full of possibilities.

They decided to set off around noon, get some supplies of fresh milk, bread and vegetables, then go on to the pub. Even so, the twilight was never far away, nibbling at the edges of the sky well before the evening. It was much colder now than when they had first come to the island, and they all wrapped up against the elements, appearances sacrificed in favour of warmth and water-tightness. They moved like suited astronauts across the scraggy grass to the quay and climbed down into the boat. Alex settled at the helm, but then Eleanor surprised Mike and Alex – and herself, a little - by asking if *she* could steer them this time. After a moment of hesitation Alex made way for her and settled, with the slightest ill-grace, onto one of the bench seats on board.

She had never piloted anything on the open seas before although she had taken the tiller on a canal boat once, years before. She found that she soon grasped the basic principles needed to keep them on course. She even steered them into a few small waves, making the boat buck and the men grab comically for the gunwales.

“I think this must make you the official pilot,” Mike said as they neared their destination. Alex had cheered up sufficiently to snap off a lopsided salute. She grinned back at them, and navigated them into the tiny mainland harbour – *pretty expertly*, she thought.

They got the craft secured – Haigh had told them about the importance of tying up to one of the sliding rings set into the harbour wall, as the tidal range out around the islands was huge. Securing the boat to a fixed point risked returning to find their ride home dangling in mid-air. They set off to walk to the shop, three abreast across the road, Eleanor as excited as she could remember being for many months. Thoughts of the island had unexpectedly faded – the real world had fallen unbidden back into focus, bright and solid.

*Chapter 24: Eleanor*

When the three strangers came in, Archie and John immediately recognised them as residents of the island. Even if the fishermen hadn’t once or twice spotted them from afar, going about their caretaking duties, it would have been obvious – casual visitors were rare come the winter. Archie slid off his barstool to extend a hand.

“Afternoon,” he said. “I’m Archie and my friend here is John, John McKay. You must be the three who are looking after the island.” From along the bar, John tipped his glass towards them.

The three introduced themselves as the publican emerged from the back of the bar, from a room so small it might have passed for a cupboard, and they introduced themselves all over again. The publican announced himself simply as Tom. He was a huge man, with a glistening bald head which adroitly avoided – although only barely - the clutter of objects which hung from the ceiling: pewter mugs, glasses, tattered scraps of fishing nets, small branches smoothed in the ocean currents. He threw out his arms in welcome and grinned a smile so wide that he showed his teeth, surprisingly white against the skin of his weather-beaten face.

They ordered drinks, to be told by Tom that the first round was on the house, provided they promised to have more than one. They all duly promised, as solemnly as they could manage, that they did indeed intend to have more than one drink. Eleanor smiled slightly as one after the other all three of them held up their hands as if swearing an oath.

They found a table in a small alcove by the hearth and settled in. The furniture would have been old fifty years previously but it was perfectly fitting in the old pub, itself little changed in a century or more. The fire quickly warmed them and they were welcomed with what looked like genuine enthusiasm. Might have had something to do with the fact that they’d just more than doubled the existing client-base, Eleanor supposed.

“Do you mind if we join you?” Archie asked. He was sitting down at their table in any case. “We don’t get many visitors in the winter, and we’re fishermen.” The three must have looked quite blank, because Archie felt compelled to carry on: “So we like to tell tales. Not so great when there’s no-one to tell them to. Our Tom’s heard them all before.”

Mike and Eleanor laughed, and, after the briefest pause, Alex smiled too.

“So how are you enjoying the island?” John queried. The two fishermen looked remarkably similar, both with beards which all but swamped their features, making their age impossible to guess, except by looking at the skin wrinkling around their eyes. Both men were slim to the point of wiry, yet moved with unhurried elegance, decades on the seas gifting them balletic poise.

“I love it!” Eleanor said quickly and Mike nodded his agreement.

“What about you? Not so keen?” Archie directed this question at Alex.

“It’s not what I’m used to, but I’m getting to like it,” Alex said, then added: “A lot.” *Had there been a touch of hesitation?* Eleanor wondered. *Who was he trying to convince?*

“So, tell us about yourselves, how you got to be marooned on a Scottish island – you are there all winter, I’m supposing?”

“All winter,” Mike confirmed.

“Marooned at Christmas,” John said wistfully and although it seemed to be a light-hearted comment, and the two other islanders grinned, Eleanor noticed that John didn’t smile with them.

They swapped a few details with the two fishermen, the sorts of things shared between strangers meeting for the first time, but always their conversation circled around to return again to the island, the undeniable centre of their disparate circle. They filled each other’s glasses and at some point beer gave way to whisky. The fire burned brightly, throwing out angry sparks when new wood was added. Without much surprise, Eleanor saw Alex’s eyelids drooping: “Sorry to be the one to break up the party, but I think we’d best be going fairly soon,” she proclaimed. “We’ve got a boat to catch.”

“It’s been a great night,” Mike said, and he pushed back his chair to start the lengthy process of getting all his clothing back on – layers had been stripped off as the temperature inside the bar had climbed. The windows in the pub were tiny and hardly allowed any glimpse of the outer world but it was a reasonable bet that it would be cold and wet.

“Are there any stories about the island?” Alex asked as he got out of his chair. He was looking slightly unsteady to Eleanor’s eye. She wondered if he would be looking forward to the boat-ride back home.

“Stories,” John repeated. “There are a few stories, aren’t there, Archie?”

“Of course,” Archie replied, his genial tone unfaltering. “There’s nowhere and nothing in the Highlands and Islands without some sort of story attached. Some of them might even be true.”

“There are caves around the back of the island,” John went on.

“We’ve seen them – I did a little exploring,” Mike interrupted. Eleanor looked over at him sharply.

“I wouldn’t do too much *exploring* in those caves,” John said. He kept a level gaze on Mike as he spoke, and it did not waver, despite all the beer and whisky which had been consumed.

“They’re not too stable you see,” Archie explained. He pushed himself up from the table as if to indicate that he was also thinking that the hour was growing late. “Wouldn’t guarantee that the roof didn’t fall in or something, if anyone was to go too far in. *Exploring*.”

“Is that the only reason for not going in?” asked Mike.

“Not the only reason,” John said.

Archie laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder and added, to the three visitors: “As I said, there are always stories.” Eleanor looked over to Alex, who suddenly seemed a million miles away from sleep. Then she glanced back at Mike, whose face shone in the firelight like an excited boy around his first camp fire.

“I get the feeling that this is the start of a ghost story,” Eleanor said, sitting down again.

“The start of a ghost story,” John repeated reflectively. “No, not a ghost story,” he said at length, after deliberating long and hard.

“But there is…*something* *odd*…about those caves,” Eleanor prompted.

“I’ve never seen anything, have you?” Archie said, directing his question to John. Eleanor could detect the strongest sense that there was an unspoken dialogue going on between them, a decision being taken, a tipping point reached and passed.

“I’ve never seen anything on that island,” John said. Eleanor could see that Tom the publican had come as close as he could to them, leaning across the bar so that his paunch sat heavily on the dark varnished wood, listening intently and suddenly serious.

John waved a hand towards the table and they settled down again, the publican producing another round of drinks before resting himself across the bar again.

“Most of the islands had crofters who lived on them, once upon a time,” John began. He might have detected a measure of puzzlement on one or more of the faces of the visitors, because he went on to explain. “Crofters were very small scale farmers – looked after a few sheep, moved them around a bit to get some grazing, sometimes island to island. Not that these parts are so good for grazing, of course. Or for shepherds, come to that. Too cold, too salty. Too…sparse.” He smirked. Eleanor thought his smile looked cold.

“Anyway, your little island was a bit of an exception to that. It never had a croft built there – your man Haigh was the first person to put up any sort of permanent structure on the island. Certainly it was the first time in my lifetime that anyone had actually stayed there more than a couple of nights, I suppose.”

“And something horrible happened?” Eleanor asked.

John looked genuinely surprised. “No, not that I’ve heard of. A few accidents over the years, minor stuff though, no more than you would expect from an outdoor pursuits centre. A busted arm, perhaps a case of concussion, I certainly never heard of anything worse, although I’m sure they would be wanting to keep it quiet if anything did happen. Bad for business. But before Haigh and his company arrived, the island was…I don’t know if this is the right word, but...*lonely*. I know that sounds strange, but…what do you reckon, Archie? Am I right?” Archie, who had been listening silently, nodded his head.

John went on. “Even so, I’m not sure the island welcomed company. The caves got used back in the day, so I’ve been told: the crew of the odd fishing vessel might have overnighted on the island, some folks might stay there to camp out and watch the wildlife – and there were locals who need secluded places to store goods which *might* have been of particular interest to her Majesty’s Customs and Excise, if you understand me?”

“Smugglers? Haigh kind-of mentioned that when he first showed us around,” said Alex. Eleanor looked around at the group and thought that but for a few undeniably twenty-first century touches, like their colourful all-weather gear, theirs could have been any gathering since time immemorial, a handful of humanity huddling close to the fire, listening to eerie tales on a winter’s night.

“Prefer to think of them as just a few poor folk doing whatever they needed to get by,” John said evenly. “Let’s say that some of the locals found that they could stash a few things away in the caves, where no-one was likely to go poking their noses into Highland business.”

“Like *Whisky Galore*,” Mike said. John looked at him blankly, but Archie grunted an agreement.

“The story goes that two such gangs had a bit of a falling out, so that one lot would go and help themselves to what the other lot had hidden away. Not very gentlemanly, no honour amongst thieves as far as these folk were concerned. So neither group felt happy about leaving their goods unguarded. Then one of these gangs thinks to themselves that the best thing to do was to leave one of their youngest lads behind on a sort of guard duty. Probably a laddie only too keen to show his worth to his bosses. Or maybe they had to press him into it, who knows? Anyway this youngster, maybe full of bravado, maybe shitting himself, maybe a bit of both, gets to stand guard in the cave, making sure that the other gang don’t come and fill their boots. Just to make sure that everything is as secure as possible, the gang decide to provide him with a flintlock to take care of any arguments over property rights if visitors arrive one dark night.”

“Do I get the feeling this will not end well?” Eleanor asked. It all sounded rather trite – a melange of predictable Gothic elements. All that was missing now was to add a storm to complete the picture: like an episode of *Scooby-Doo*: *it was the fisherman dressed up with a mask, and he would have got away with it if it hadn’t been for those pesky kids.* Yet even despite all the unadulterated kitsch, there was something about the story which subtly leached the evening of its previous good cheer.

“Spot on,” John said. “Story goes that, over time, the boy began to go a bit strange in the head, talked about not wanting to be left alone in the caves, that sort of thing. Got so that some of the men said the lad should be relieved of his guard duty, but then all of a sudden the kid has a change of heart, and he wasn’t having any of it – he *liked* it on the island, so he said, alone for days and nights in the caves. So it went on, until one day, just as they were thinking that maybe they should take him off after all, give him a break, they went to pick up their latest haul only to find it all gone, every last stick of it. Looked like their rivals had landed a boat on the beach and helped themselves to everything. No sign of their watchman, though. So they set off to search for him, all over your island….”

“But they didn’t find him?” Alex added. Eleanor suspected that Alex, scientific and logical, was nonetheless getting drawn into this tale.

“Oh, they did find him,” John said. “In the end they looked in the back of the caves themselves, into the bowels of the earth. They squeezed through passages, over the rubble that had fallen to the floor and lain there since before there were true people on the Earth at all. So on they went, walking where they could, crawling when needed, nearly abandoning the search time and again, until some tiny clue was found that someone had been there before them – maybe a spent match, a scrap of food, I don’t know what – *something*. Then they came to a space so far into the cave that they should by rights have been under the seabed, right across to the other side of the island, but that space was huge, so big that their lanterns could barely light a portion. But there was a familiar smell about it, wet copper and cordite. They searched and searched, and eventually found the boy – what was left of him – sitting up, with the flintlock jammed in his mouth and his brains spread all up the wall. Legend has it that they left the body there. No-one has ever found it since – no-one’s wanted to look too hard, neither. So, of course, his ghost is still there, deep in the caves, waiting for anyone who might go *exploring*.”

There was a pause, punctuated by the faint popping of the fire. “Wow,” said Alex, with distinctly limited enthusiasm. Eleanor had to remind herself that Alex was a grown-up: in fact, a highly intelligent grown-up. Assuming that he was entirely taken in by midnight ghost stories was to underestimate him, for all that he sometimes looked like a little boy, wide-eyed with credulous wonder. She made a mental resolution to chill out a little. Her earlier feeling that John’s story had punctured the good mood was right, however: they sat in subdued silence, the merriment of an evening on Highland whisky dimming to become something less cheery. Mike led the group out, Eleanor and Alex still zipping up their waterproofs as they walked.

*Chapter 25: Archie and John*

Having waved off the visitors Tom poured more drinks, this time set up on the bar, which they all recognized as a shorthand way of saying: *one last drink boys*. Nor was it entirely lost on them that this round was beer, not whisky. For tonight, at least, the party was over.

“What happened there?” Archie asked. “That last story pissed them off a bit, did you think?”

“Didn’t mean to do that,” John said. His eyes did not rise to meet those of his friend. “They did seem to go a little quiet, though.”

From behind the bar Tom murmured an agreement.

“Where did you get all that crap about the smugglers and the boy with his brains blown out?” Archie said. “Though it’s better than what you could have said, I’ll allow.”

John took a big swallow of his drink, then looked up at his friend with a grin and a shrug. “It was a good tale though, don’t you think?”

“Was it supposed to frighten them?” Archie couldn’t help but feel, in some small way, that the story had been less than courteous, a little mean even, an example of locals spinning a story for tourists but without the charm of being a knowing pretence.

“How could anybody be frightened at that?” John protested. “It was the purest bullshit and they knew it as well as we did. More-or-less asked for a ghost story, didn’t they? Only gave them what they were looking for, didn’t I?”

Archie watched his companion carefully, with a feeling this evening that perhaps he didn’t know John as well as he would have believed. Over the years, he had trusted John with his livelihood, and more than once, in grey and stormy seas, with his life. Yet now, Archie’s first thought was that John lied in every word, and he could not shake the feeling that his friend watched him from beneath hooded eyelids, to see the effect those lies might have upon him. It was like walking down a familiar street and turning a corner into a wholly alien landscape, previously unknown.

Tom began to busy himself around them as they sat, clearing away the empty glasses and wiping down the surfaces, scooping up bar towels. “I don’t think for one moment that there’s anything in those caves except what the tide takes in, despite…despite anything. On the other hand I’m guessing that you won’t be fighting each other to spend a night on the island again any time soon?” Archie and John finished their drinks in uncharacteristic silence.

*Chapter 26: Alex and Eleanor*

“What did you make of that?” Eleanor asked as they walked. They had brought torches over from the island, heavy duty flashlights as thick as Eleanor’s forearm, which now cast wide pools of yellow light to bob across the uneven ground, reflecting in innumerable puddles.

Alex laughed. “Interesting stories they told. The obligatory warning fable for the disbelieving visitors from the big city.”

“It reminds me of a sort-of-story that got told to me on a school trip, ages ago, when the class stayed somewhere overnight and we got told tales by the teachers.” Eleanor wondered, too late to stop herself, if it was a little sad to be recalling such a seemingly insignificant event in detail years later, emphasising, if emphasis were needed, that there was so little in her later life to remember.

Wrapped in water-proof clothing, they trod carefully. From time to time one or the other would lurch or stumble, footfalls breaking through a thin skin of freezing mud to sink into the coldness below. “What about your sort-of story?” Alex prompted.

Eleanor considered for a few seconds. “It was more like a shaggy dog story.” Now she thought about it, the whole situation she found herself in now put her in mind of that long-ago school trip. There was the same delicious feeling of unlimited possibility, especially – *and let’s be honest* she instructed herself - contrasted against the mundane drudgery which had characterised her life so far. Even the weather back then had been much the same, cool enough at all times to maintain through most of the day an icy spot on the tip of her nose; sometimes achingly cold, becoming just a bit chilly, but never approaching anything that could be described as warm. She could picture the teacher who told the story, although she couldn’t be sure that it wasn’t actually a composite of authority figures from her childhood. It was one of her male teachers, a rare enough creature in her primary school to be remembered for that alone. *Another anthem of my lost youth*, she thought. These random thoughts felt increasingly natural as her world shrank to being only the three of them.

“Let’s hear it,” said Alex sidling towards her, attentive. Their arms brushed against each other as they walked and even the illumination of their torches merged to make a complex shifting shape ahead of them, which rippled in tandem with their common pace.

“OK, then – the story goes like this: Years ago I lived in a small village. There wasn’t much to do, so every year, my friends and I went scrumping…” Alex looked slightly quizzical, she thought. “You know, going into orchards and taking apples that don’t belong to you. We went into every farm for miles around but there was one in particular that was surrounded by a great big wall and if you could just get a peek over that wall…well, every apple was huge, as big as a baby’s head some of them, and red – glowing in fact - and every tree was hung with so many apples that the branches drooped nearly to the ground. Prime hunting-ground for us – except that none of us ever ventured into this field, because it was supposedly haunted by the ghost of a boy who had filched apples there years before, had been caught by the farmer and killed. No-one had been able to prove anything and the child had been buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in the densest part of the orchard. Unlikely, I know, but that was the story. Anyway, as is the way with these things, we talked about it and talked about it until one day me and two of my best friends – let’s call them Wendy and Danny – decided that we just had to go for it, attempt the Mount Everest of apple-stealing exploits. So, one day, we go over the wall, me, Danny and Wendy, and we make for one of the trees dripping with the biggest, juiciest apples. But when we get there, we see another tree, with even bigger and even juicier apples a few steps further in, so we move on a bit – and so on, and so on, getting deeper and deeper into the wood. Danny says he’s getting a bad feeling about all this, he wants to go home, so he’s hanging back a bit. Me and Wendy carry on until we find the best tree so far, and Wendy is up there, quick as a flash. So there she is, sitting on a branch, happy as can be, eating apples, throwing some down to me to collect in my jumper, when suddenly she tenses up and starts shouting – not at me, but at Danny. *Run*, she screams at him, *run*! Then I hear the sound of Danny running, like he’s been told, but also the sound of something else, not running exactly, but *crashing* through the trees – I even see one tree go down, very close. Then I hear a scream, and it’s Danny, but not like I’ve heard him shout ever before, this is a real belter. Then, I’m off and running as well, and behind me, Wendy-up-the-tree is giving me a running commentary: *It’s coming closer, oh God, it’s horrible, it’s passing me now…*then another almighty crash and another scream, and I know that somewhere behind me, Wendy’s tree has come down too, so now it’s just me and whatever it is that’s killed my two best friends. I run, and I stumble, and I run some more, and I can hear it coming at me, but I can’t turn around…finally, there’s the wall and I find a part where I think I can just about reach the top, so I jump, and I’m hanging there from my fingertips, scrabbling to get some purchase, when a cold hand closes over my ankle, and it pulls my leg, pulls my leg…just like I’m pulling your leg now!”

Alex looked at her.

“I’m pulling your leg, get it?”

Alex smiled uncertainly, but nodded. “Sure, you’re joking. I get it. So those guys at the pub were pulling our legs, you’re saying?”

“I reckon so,” Eleanor said. She couldn’t help thinking that her story deserved a slightly better reception, even from someone as socially awkward as Alex. With a tetchiness fuelled by more whisky than she had ever consumed in one sitting, she zipped her jacket up to her nose and shoved her free hand deep down into her pocket.

“Haigh told us about the caves, though. Said they were used by smugglers.” The tone of Alex’s voice carried a sense of finality.

“That doesn’t make the whole story true,” she snapped, then immediately felt a little unkind. It seemed to her to be more than a tiny bit unfair to introduce uncertainty into Alex’s bivalent world. “They’re just caves,” she added.

“Even so, a cave is a pretty eerie place,” Alex said after they had walked on for a while. Ahead of them, Mike had built up quite a lead, so that all they could see was the light of his torch, rhythmically rising and dipping. Suddenly the powerful beam snapped to one side, then turned directly back at Alex and Eleanor. They both held up their arms to shield their eyes.

“What’s up?” Eleanor shouted into the glare.

There was no answer.

“Are you OK?” Alex followed up.

“Come here,” Mike called back, his voice faint. Alex and Eleanor started to walk, holding on to each other’s arms so as not to stumble.

“Can you take the light off us?” Eleanor said.

“Sorry,” they heard Mike say. Although the beam of the torch wobbled it still lit them, only now directed at a point a few metres in front, merging with the patches of light from their own torches. Mike seemed nearer now, but even so he had managed to get a significant start on them, given that they had only left the pub a couple of minutes before. *Had Mike been running?* Eleanor wondered, but then dismissed the thought. If anything, he had looked a bit shaky when they had come out of the pub, hardly likely to think about taking a sprint into the unknown. *I should’ve realized something was wrong, looked out for him*. Then, immediately after*: You’re not his keeper, Eleanor.*

The thought that followed was so alien she could hardly imagine it was hers at all: *We are responsible for our actions. We pay a price for what we are.*

Alien or not, the thought made her feel better; stronger, even. The sudden feeling of power also reminded her of that long-ago school trip. She had felt empowered then too; removed for a few days from the dreary fetters of her family. For Eleanor, even as a child, family had equated with a crushing sense of responsibility, a necessity to care for the very people who were supposed to care for her. God knew how she had managed to get herself on the trip but she was simply thankful that, somehow, it had been arranged. It was as if her recent experiences were stripping away the years, taking her back to a time when she had been full of potential, hinting at the Eleanor that she *might* have been. Since those days of late childhood, she recognised that she had become a construct, a creature cobbled together to please parents, conform to peers, get a job, above all to *fit in.* Now, she sensed that the island was giving her something back, making a space for the real Eleanor to step back into the life which had been taken from her at some undefined point in her past.

The light flashed back into their eyes.

Flushed with the emotions stirred by old memories, she challenged Mike: “Turn the bloody torch around, you’re blinding us.” The beam flopped over to point away from the two of them. Mike was much closer now.

In a few more steps they were at Mike’s side, and he played the light out over the grasslands towards the sea. “Do you see anything?” he asked. He put his free hand on Eleanor’s shoulder.

They squinted into the night and shone their own lights in the same direction. The torchlight made hummocks of grass loom drunkenly, making the ground itself appear to undulate. Eleanor realised how huge the landscape was, how small they were against the endless rock, the restless sea and the interminable black of the sky, and how insignificant were their tiny islands of light in the dark expanse. She could imagine the three of them, very clearly, as tiny insects at the bottom of a well, one as deep as the distance between stars. And maybe, there would be something watching them, as a dispassionate scientist would observe the antics of creatures that swarmed frenziedly in horrible ignorance.

“Hold the light more steady,” Alex said.

“It *is* bloody steady! I’m holding it steady!” Mike snapped. Eleanor took a step back.

“Sorry,” Alex said forlornly. He was thinking that he had somehow misjudged the situation. A formless embarrassment burned his cheeks. Eleanor felt that it was Mike who should be apologising and readied herself to tell him as much.

“There!” Mike shouted. “Do you see it?”

Eleanor was about to say *No*, but a shape sluggishly resolved itself out of the drizzle and the shadows in the puny ochre cone of torchlight, its edges indistinct, but definitely moving, and increasingly quickly.

“What the hell is it?” Alex yelled back.

“It looks…a person,” Mike said. As Eleanor watched, the shape did indeed seem to become more human, although the form was shifting like smoke, as if in response to his suggestion.

“Can’t be very big. Must be a child,” said Alex. He manged to sound full of conviction and simultaneously consumed with doubt.

“At this time? On its own?” said Eleanor automatically. “We’d better see if it needs any help.” She set off across the grassland.

“No wait!” Mike was calling her and she thought that his voice cracked. *What can possibly be scaring him? A child lost in the dark? It made no sense.*

She decided to ignore him and picked up her pace. Almost immediately, she felt the ground beneath her become spongy, and then freezing water poured in over the tops of her boots. Another couple of faltering steps and she was up to her knees in water that felt oily, polluted. The shock made her breath catch in her chest, so that she could not even give voice to the cry that formed. Her torch slipped out of her grasp, flickering for the briefest moment before being extinguished.

“Are you OK?” It was difficult for Eleanor to tell where Alex’s voice originated. Perhaps she had somehow turned herself around as she had stumbled. The rain seemed to be heavier now, thrown down with enough force to sting. A patina of brackish water ran off her hood and over her face.

“I’m fine.” Eleanor simply tilted her head and bellowed. “Don’t worry about me, go and get to the child.” One light danced wildly over her, casting shadows which raced away into the greater darkness beyond. But was the light coming now from in front? It was increasingly difficult to tell but it seemed that way.

She found herself slowly sinking, and, absurdly, unable to find the purchase she needed to pull her feet out of the mud. Putting weight on one foot only made the other go under all the faster. She wondered just how deep the mire went.

“Where are you?” Eleanor could just make out the call, carried by the gusting wind. She couldn’t tell if it was Mike or Alex. Then all the remaining lights went out.

*Chapter 27: Mike*

Mike continued to stare into the darkness. He thought he had seen a brief glimpse of Eleanor, although she had appeared cut off at the knees and arched backwards, as if looking up into the sky, or praying.

Eleanor would have to look after herself. There was something else out there, something which moved without pause, not troubled by the dying of the light but drawing strength from the darkness. A dead boy, Mike thought, who had spent his last days in fire and pain. A boy with half his face burnt away, a ragged hole where the back of his head had been. As the figure swept towards him, the great wound in its head oozed with shattered bone, and blood, and flecks of ruined brain. Sometimes fresh and scarlet, then ancient, like a stain of rust, flickering from one image to the other. Then, without warning, the flesh would boil and char. But Mike was no stranger to blood, nor to the stench of burning flesh. He began to back away on legs that suddenly felt as insubstantial as spider silk.

Mike imagined more: the gore and broken matter washed by the driving rain into wide puddles, filling footprints stamped into the coarse heather. He imagined a misshapen skull, with the gleam of teeth exposed in the moonlight. Then he could *see* all of those things. The nightmare paralysis froze his voice, a scream that refused to be uttered. The child loomed out of the dark and grabbed for him, clawed hands taking fistfuls of his jacket and drawing its twisted face to his, ruined eyes to his own.

“Mike,” it said, and abruptly the figure before him was no child at all but Alex, his hood rippling in the wind, shadows forming skeletal eye-sockets, the lamplight sanguine-red on the waterproof. “Where’s Eleanor? I can hear her but I can’t work out where she is.”

Mike found that he still couldn’t speak: his heart hammered with such sledge-hammer force that there was no room left for breath. Alex tried again. “Mike? Can you hear me?”

Mike grunted. It was all he could manage.

Alex gazed out into the night. “Is there a child out there? Eleanor thinks so.”

Mike shook his head. “No,” he managed to say. He was surprised by the firmness he heard in his own voice.

“What’s happened to the torches?”

“Bad batteries?” Mike said.

“In all of them? At the same time?” Alex held up his torch. In that moment, the bulbs began to glow again. The two men, roughly back-to-back, shone their lights around, until the bobbing pools of illumination found Eleanor.

She squinted and held a hand over her eyes, before giving them a wave. Alex and Mike waded over to her side and moments later were working together to pull her out from the mud. Finally, with a sucking gurgle which nearly robbed her of a boot, Eleanor was free.

“You OK?” Mike asked.

“I’m fine,” Eleanor replied. “But there’s a child out here, he must be lost.” As she spoke, she was twisting around, staring out across the wilderness.

“He?” said Mike.

“Or she. Didn’t you two get a look? He must have passed right by you.” She looked from Mike to Alex and back again. Alex shook his head, firmly enough to send drops of rainwater flying in a wide arc from the lip of his hood.

“Mike?” questioned Eleanor.

“I didn’t see a child,” he said. “Did you Alex?”

Alex opened his mouth as if to speak but then snapped it shut again.

“If there’s a child out here, we must find it. Or go back to the pub, get a search party,” Eleanor instructed, taking Mike by an elbow, urging him on. Each of them looked around where they stood although visibility was dropping by the second, surrounding them in a cloying mist. Whatever they imagined to be stalking them could loom out of the grey haze at any moment.

Then, shockingly close, a harsh braying laugh. They all jumped and Mike held up his hands as if in surrender. Eleanor clasped him close to her.

Towards them lumbered a huge beast with filthy wool hanging from its flanks in thick sodden dags. It had managed to walk up to them, its approach disguised by the rainfall, unnoticed until its ugly cry. After a heartbeat still as statues they all laughed in relief, and finally backed cautiously away towards the roadway. Sheep weren’t supposed to be scary, but the Highland animals bred large and they could more than hold their ground against anyone who intruded on their turf. It didn’t follow them but they did hear it cry out again once more, a sound that haunted the night and kept their hearts hammering long after they might have rationalised their fears away.

Mike, outwardly calm, clenched his arms to his sides to stem the quaking that threatened to overwhelm him, and tried to clear his mind of the malignant images that still bubbled there.

*Chapter 28: Alex*

Days passed and they found themselves increasingly comfortable in each other’s company, although never quite relaxed enough to sit down and discuss all that had happened. From time-to-time, one or other of them would make some reference to something they had experienced on the island: they would joke about the need to hang on tightly if one of them had to climb a ladder, for example; over dinner someone might remind the others about the mud-drenched sheep that they had been intent on rescuing. When they walked the beaches surveying the detritus washed up on the shores, they walked together in easy silence for the most part. They rarely spoke of the story they had been told in the pub and their own experiences they kept to themselves. In this way what passed for normality could continue unchallenged.

Alex became increasingly engrossed in his work. He remembered his first meeting with Eleanor and Mike and how anxious he had felt about explaining the project to them. It didn’t seem so important, now. He felt that he was very close indeed to the refinements in the program which would make it saleable. The worries which had plagued him since arriving on the island all seemed to be receding now: the lack of internet had turned out to be something of a boon, as he found it much easier to focus on his work. What Alex hadn’t shared with his fellow islanders was the relief he felt at not having easy access to drugs – there wasn’t even any alcohol. As a result, Alex felt a little better, a little *sharper*, with every passing day.

He had been worried at first about how he would get on with his fellow exiles – but he felt familiar enough around them now, as much as he did with anyone. Most of all, he had been worried that all his work would come to nothing – that the extraordinary future he foresaw for his program would remain unrealised. As he had explained to Mike and Eleanor when they had first met, the pattern-recognition he was aiming for was levels of complexity beyond other, run-of-the-mill programs. He knew, with a conviction that brooked no doubt, that his program would be a genuine game-changer. It would be the go-to software for scientists looking for extra-terrestrial intelligent life in signals from other planets, it would translate lost languages, spot developing epidemics – the possibilities were limitless and he had created it all.

He knew that the program still needed to be tested in a real-world setting, and that continued to be a worry. Of course it was good at identifying patterns – but it also had to be able to discriminate between design and co-incidence. It needed testing in complex, practical situations.

He waited for a clear day – which came around less and less often. As winter began to settle into the fabric of the island, the days shortened to grey stumps, and the activities of the three islanders – the repairs and checks; the circumnavigations of the coastline and the record-keeping; every routine they followed – was all squeezed into an ever-shorter working day. Dank fogs rolled in relentlessly, driven by ever-harsher winds. Rain fell in freezing sheets and the rainwater penetrated everything, becoming a tangible misery. Mike and Alex began to swaddle themselves in increasing layers of clothing – Eleanor seemed to tolerate the cold better, all the more surprising as she was so very slight. So on the next clear day, Alex was ready with his camera, eager not to miss his chance.

“Are you going out to take some pictures?” Eleanor asked brightly. “Mind if I tag along too?”

Alex thought about it. In the recent past he might well have told her that he *did* object. But when he reflected, he found that he didn’t mind if Eleanor tagged along. He nodded with what he hoped conveyed enthusiasm.

The two of them started the slow and careful process of getting dressed for the outside, finally stepping, wrapped and protected, onto the veranda at the front of the building. The atmosphere was still heavy with the deep chill of night and with an understanding that the sunshine of the day to come would not be enough to banish that. Moisture was captive in the winds which churned around them, making the air itself feel viscous and walking become like wading through sodden cobwebs. Even so, Alex thought that the light was good, so the photographs would be clear, which would be vital to the success of his experiment.

“Are you just taking holiday snaps? Or is there something more to it?” She often showed a curious ability to intuit what he was up to, Alex considered.

“I’m going to see what patterns the program can find in pictures of the natural world.” He still needed to wrap himself up. The Hebridean sunlight was bright but, come winter, rarely very warm.

“So,” she said. “No false positives, am I right?”

Alex was frankly a little surprised that she had remembered what he had told her about the importance of eliminating false positive readings “That’s right,” he said. “It should be able to learn to identify features new to it, without seeing ghosts.”

“Ghosts?”

“Things that aren’t really there,” he told her. “The technical term is pareidolia: finding pseudo-patterns in random data. Like the face on Mars.”

Eleanor looked blank, and once again, Alex was able to interpret Eleanor’s silence as being due to a lack of understanding, not a lack of interest. *I’m getting good at this emotion-guessing business*, he thought.

“When photographs came back from spaceships orbiting Mars, some people said that they saw a face down on the surface. It did *look* a lot like a face, just staring up into the sky. Then it was all over the internet; *Martian statue found*. They had another look, of course; it was nothing more than a bunch of rocks that got illuminated in a weird way but by the time that news got out the usual suspects on the internet were crying *cover-up*, of course.”

Eleanor nodded. “What was that word again?”

“Pareidolia?”

“I’ll stick with *ghosts*. Easier to say.”

Their tour took them around the island, from the flat pebble beach in front of the main building, to the beginning of the path which led to the highest point (an area they had taken to calling *The Summit*) and from there to the cave. Alex wanted to capture the deeply textured places of the island, the areas where there was pattern to be found – in the striations of the rock, the blends of colour in the ocean, in the changing traces of the clouds. As they walked Alex and Eleanor talked, Alex finding the conversation easy. He didn’t have to try too hard to laugh at her anecdotes, because he knew when she was trying to make a joke and that realisation alone made him relaxed enough in his amusement.

It was a happy, easy time, and their day passed quickly. Twilight crept upon them and neither of them was keen to be out in the night, especially if that found them in the high places of the island, where the paths were narrow and the footing treacherous. Walking down the path towards home, Eleanor suddenly took hold of Alex’s arm, stopping them both.

“Are you happy here, Alex?” she asked. Her tone changed, subtly, to become more serious. “On the island, I mean.”

He was so surprised by the question that he struggled to frame a suitable reply. Indeed, he had to give it some considerable thought. *Was* he happy here on the island*?* It wasn’t an easy question to answer. In the great outdoors, taking photographs: that was fine, wasn’t it? Having the time and space to work on the final stages of developing the program – *that* was exactly what he wanted, what he had been hoping for, so surely that must be good too. And yet there was something which prevented him just saying a straightforward *Yes*. In the end, he couldn’t answer at all, so using another technique he had been taught, he turned the question around. “Are *you* happy?” *People love to talk about themselves*. So much so that nine times out of ten, they wouldn’t even notice that you never actually answered *their* questions.

Eleanor looked almost as surprised as Alex himself had been. There was little uncertainty in her response, however. “I love it!” she said and beamed at Alex. “I feel like…like I’ve come home.”

“Home?” Alex questioned.

“Somewhere I feel welcome, where I am accepted for who I am – a whole cargo of clichés, aren’t I? But it’s true, I feel like I belong here, Alex, and it feels like the island welcomes me. Don’t you feel the same?”

“I’m not welcome here,” he said carefully.

Eleanor looked crestfallen. “But it is so beautiful,” she began, as if that had any bearing. Alex looked around. Everywhere there was colour and grandeur, boundless drama. It was undeniably beautiful. But Alex could almost imagine that this was like an epic artwork, exact to the finest detail, created by the finest craftsman, but nonetheless fake, thin and ephemeral, something laid atop another, more iniquitous reality altogether. “It is beautiful,” he agreed at length and they walked the rest of the way in companionable quiet.

Back in his room, after a quick supper, Alex lit the wicks on his kerosene lamps and took his time to set them carefully, so that they would be at their brightest. He needed to avoid the wicks smouldering, which would create an evil oily stench that could linger for days. Outside it was already past twilight, if not yet quite night. He connected the camera to his computer, then with a few keystrokes set the program running. He debated with himself and then decided to turn off the voice, much as he liked it – there would probably be too much happening for the machine to talk to him coherently. With that, he instructed the program to begin its insatiable search for information within the pictures he had taken.

He was hunching over the machine so he willed himself to sit up straighter – it could well be a long process, and he didn’t want to have to fight off cramps and stiffness later. The first picture was displayed on the screen: a view out to sea, taken from immediately outside of the front door, when he and Eleanor had stood on the veranda in the lukewarm sunshine. It showed the beach, the sea and the sky – plenty of detail there to process. Sure enough, numbers started scrolling across the panel beneath the picture, which had been, until then, blank. On the screen itself, line-drawn polygons started to grow, connecting areas of the image together. After a few seconds, a message started to scroll:

**Pebble beach 89% probability, Sea 89% probability, Winter 77% probability…**

As each term appeared, the numbers constantly changed and different areas on the photograph were highlighted. Finally, the machine began to demonstrate patterns for which it had no identification, as yet.

He could choose to enter some more details, start the process which would teach the machine how to recognise this *particular* sea from other seas it would have known previously. It could easily start to be able to tell the difference between the steel grey of the Atlantic from the turquoise of the Mediterranean, distinguish rough seas from calm, even come to describe strength of the prevailing wind …but all of that that was incidental – for now, Alex just wanted the program to run, and see what it recognised and what it would earmark for future investigation. His program was truly excellent at recognising things – lots of different things. But what made it really remarkable was the way it could learn to recognise *new* things, start to make decisions contingent upon guesses which were themselves based on guesses, and then *learn* through those processes. He wanted people to say of his work that it marked the beginning of true artificial intelligence. The program could almost grow to be another member of their team.

The list on the screen continued to scroll, assigning probabilities to what was being pictured, based on all that previous information and knowledge. Every so often, Alex took a little time to enter in some responses, indicating where he agreed with the machine, or making a suggestion for following up on an ambiguity. By the second picture, the program was starting to be more precise, giving Alex an ever increasing flow of ever more detailed information: soon it would tell him its best guess about the minerals making up the pebbles, why wave actions were as they were, how the position of the sun could be determined from the light…he had to limit what the machine was searching for, or else the program would start to eat up its own processing power in an ever-wider search cycle. The informational ripples could theoretically go on indefinitely, but the machine, like anything, had finite capacity. On a computer with greater storage capacity the output that his program promised became exponentially greater. His machine hummed as more detailed material flashed across his screen. This was perfect, exactly what he had hoped for and what he had worked towards all these years.

The next set of pictures had been taken as Alex and Eleanor had moved around to the side of the main building, firstly taking in the view towards the sea, then switching to looking up towards the Summit. Alex decided to focus the descriptions on features of the landscape, giving the instruction to recognise which areas contained pictures of plants, which were rocks, which were part of the paths. Explanations and probabilities tumbled on.

“Uh-oh,” Alex said. He had just seen something flash by on his screen, too fast to make out exactly what it had been. He halted the flow of information and started to scroll back manually. He was well practised in that IT art, so soon found what he had been looking for:

**…unidentified human form, probability 17%...**

Alex frowned, then looked closely at the picture on the screen. It showed the rocky Summit and the path leading to it but nothing more. A few seagulls, perhaps, were visible in the distance, but certainly no people. More than that, nothing that even looked a bit *like* a person. Apart from Alex himself – who had been behind the camera – there had only been Eleanor, and Mike indoors at the chalet. In any case, the machine was able to recognise both Mike and Eleanor – Alex had already taught it.

It was just possible, Alex supposed, that there *was* someone else on the island. Haigh, maybe, or one of the fishermen, like the two who had tried to frighten them with their crappy campfire tales that night in the pub. But the program – his clever, intuitive program – would have no problem identifying a human form – so why only 17% sure? What did that suggest? Alex struggled to make sense of it. He spent longer just looking at the picture, staring *into* it, trying to imagine how the machine could possibly misinterpret what it was looking at. Then he typed in a few more commands, limiting the recognition to just that one parameter, that of varieties of human form. He moved on to the next photograph, originally taken only a few steps further on from the last, showing an almost identical view.

**Human form, probability 22%**

Alex looked intently into the second picture – he could still make out nothing remotely like a human form. He felt his previous excitement replaced by a sick heaviness settled in the pit of his stomach. If the program was struggling to identify something as basic as the human form, that would suggest a serious problem. Months-more-work type serious? He pondered. Certainly public-demonstration-cancelled serious. Surely not game-over type serious? This would be a correctable glitch, he had to believe. He moved on to the next photograph, and brought that up on screen. Immediately, another description popped up underneath.

**Human form, probability 29%**

“Oh fuck,” he whispered. Once again he gazed deep into the photograph, and then exported it into one of his viewing applications. He tried looking at it under greater magnifications, thinking that there might be something humanoid in the deep background. Surely that would be the answer: far from being a bug in the system, the program was – rightly – picking up something too indistinct for the naked eye. A reflection, maybe, too faint for Alex to see? That was kind-of what he wanted from it, wasn’t it? Something beyond the merely human capacity for finding a message in the noise. He peered in once again with precise care, hoping that a figure would resolve itself, like in a ‘Magic eye’ puzzle. Try as he might, there was nothing there. “Could do with a Martian face popping out of the background right now,” Alex muttered.

The next picture, taken a little further up the path:

**Human form, probability 40%**

Then the next, then another, each one a few more steps along from its predecessor, and still the same message but with the percentage ticking inexorably upwards:

**55%**

Then:

**68%**

**85%**

Still no actual person showing up in the picture and no image remotely person-like. Which was crazy, because the program had never been so wrong before, and yet it still wasn’t certain itself. If not *exactly* a person, what did it think it could see? There was still nothing out of the ordinary, nothing beyond the perfectly normal view anyone would see approaching the highest point of the island. Alex continued his long gaze into the screen. He had a sudden irrational fear that the image would tear apart like wet tissue, with whatever was behind it being the formless, colourless chaos he had feared all of his life.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Alex wasn’t sure whether he was asking the computer, or talking to himself. This had all the signs of being a systemic failure. Just as he thought that all his work was coming together, just as the end had been in sight. Now this – a complete snafu, telling him that there was *probably* a person in the picture in front of him now, when there clearly wasn’t. Alex bent back to his keyboard again, fingers jabbing hard on the keys. The current picture disappeared and was replaced by the next.

The new photograph showed the path, the sky beyond, and nothing more. Alex was hoping against hope that this time the message would be different. It *was*:

**Human face: probability 100%, identity unknown**

Alex rocked back in his chair. What was being described through the sequence was an occurrence commonplace enough – someone walking towards the camera, captured in a sort of stop-motion marionette march, and then stepping up close to push their face into the lens. It was the stuff of thousands of jokey picture series. But what he was seeing on the screen described something not captured by the pictures, something clear enough to his program but, to Alex, invisible.

Alex took some deep breaths, struggling to smother a panic which felt unstoppable. “Just a bug,” he whispered to himself. It didn’t invalidate what he had already done. It didn’t wreck the PhD, it didn’t mean the program was useless. It was a good thing to have found what was, please God, a relatively minor problem now rather than have it emerge and bite his backside at some other time – horror of horrors, when he was presenting it to potential buyers, for example. At the same time, he tried to think his way through the higher levels of the code – what fundamental error had he overlooked, what mistake had been made?

“This is a good thing, a very good thing,” he reassured himself. Then his mind was flooded with thoughts as random and pivotal as the first patter of raindrops on a baking summer’s day, *Tra La* *La – I Goofed*, *Aged Fool, I Goofed Again….* a jumbled series of phantasmagorias outlandish enough to make him bite back a cry. The rip in reality he had imagined inflated itself into a chasm, nothing less than the mental collapse he had always feared and half-anticipated.

He pushed back in his chair and got to his feet. Is this how it happened? The great big outside world indifferently rolling on, while everything that defined him fell apart inside his own head?

He snatched up one of the lamps and went to find Eleanor.

*Chapter 29: Eleanor*

Eleanor was in bed when Alex knocked at the door. She had not been sleeping, nor had she been exactly awake, but was suspended delicately between those two states, memories and dreams coalescing into the night-narratives she needed. In these fantasies, she was a mother – no, a *matriarch* – with generation after generation coming to her to share in her wisdom. It didn’t matter to her why they came, she could be the support to them that her mother had never been for her. Alex’s knocking had not been loud but it had been insistent, making Eleanor struggle reluctantly into full wakefulness. The echo of a shout seemed to reverberate for the briefest time, and Eleanor could not tell if it came from her dream world or the cold world of the wakeful, so it was forgotten.

“Who’s there?” she asked, although she was sure it was Alex – even his door-knocking was distinctive.

“Me. Can I talk to you?”

Eleanor shuffled into a sitting position, drawing the bedclothes up to her chin. “Of course, come on in.”

The door opened and Alex stepped through. His face glowed with the sickly luminescence of his lamp, which made deep shadows scuttle from corner to corner of the room. If Alex hadn’t looked so serious, Eleanor might have wondered if he was pulling some sort of elaborate Halloween hoax.

“I need your help,” he said.

“What’s the matter?” To Eleanor, he looked beyond worried.

“I need you to come and look at something on the computer. Just tell me what you see. I need another opinion in case I’m going mad.” So, clearly not an unseasonal trick-or-treat Eleanor admitted. She slipped out of her bed, immediately teeth-clenchingly cold, feet numbing rapidly on the floor, and pulling on a jumper followed Alex back to his room.

At first, she struggled to understand what it was that had upset him. The program on which he spent all his time had thrown out something *anomalous* he told her – had got something wrong, she supposed that meant. For Eleanor, the concept that a machine might go wrong was so unsurprising as to be utterly unremarkable. In her experience computer error was as commonplace as – well, about as commonplace as *human* error. Little by little, she began to appreciate why Alex was pacing and running his hands through his hair: the machine was repeatedly telling him that there was something there, something unseen in the pictures he had taken when they had been together. An error like that might throw everything it claimed to see, all the patterns it supposedly recognised, into doubt. She dimly understood that there was something even more scary for Alex in this: the certainties of mathematics had been called into question. She already knew that Alex distrusted anything that could not be tamed by being numbered and quantified. Yet here was his program telling him that there was a face in the picture – one hundred percent certain, no less - when there clearly wasn’t. Without understanding the least part of what it was about, Eleanor could see that the program’s failure would open up a gigantic hole in the fabric of the world for Alex, a hole that he might just fall right through.

Alex asked Eleanor if she had seen anyone else during their walk. She told him that there had been no-one but a very quiet voice within queried that. *Had* there been someone else? Someone not acknowledged, a movement fleetingly caught from the corner of the eye? Of course not. Yet…

She asked Alex if she could look at the pictures herself. She had no idea what she might look for, but imagined that it might calm Alex.

“Lie down.” Her command sounded more hesitant than she would have wanted. He looked at her without understanding. “On the bed,” she said, pointing. Slightly to her surprise, he did lay down, staring up at the ceiling arms straight at his sides, as if he had been standing to attention and keeled over.

Eleanor began to scroll through the pictures, trying to find something in them that might look like a figure, or a face, or anything out of the ordinary. The ebbing and flowing light of the kerosene lamps jarred with the glare of the computer screen, as if the two illuminations, born in different centuries, found themselves at war. Eleanor wasn’t altogether surprised that the computer seemed to be struggling; out-of-sorts, if that was a phrase which could be applied to a machine. Twenty-first century gear seemed subtly out of place here. Before long her eyes ached and she was longing to close them, but she persevered, determined to find something which might help Alex.

She flicked through the photographs, so that their earlier journey was reproduced, in steps, on the screen. On the bed, Alex still lay inert except for slow and rhythmic breathing, staring up at the ceiling. Eleanor imagined that he had found some internal ‘Pause’ button and had, for the time being at least, passed responsibility for whatever happened next to her. She hoped that she would justify that trust.

She heard Mike’s soft tread in the corridor outside without taking her eyes from the screen. It was never fully quiet or still on the island – there was always the wind, and the far-away susurration of the waves, interwoven with the ever-present sounds of the birds – but it became as quiet as it ever did, an almost-silence interrupted by the occasional soft clatter of Eleanor’s fingers on the keyboard and by Alex’s regular breathing. Eleanor felt a bone-deep weariness, stealthy at first, but rapidly all-enveloping. Her eye-lids drooped and her head fell forward momentarily. She saw that even in the space of a second or two, her hand must have brushed the keyboard to form a jumbled nonsense sentence. The cursor blinked once or twice, then a new message appeared.

**Unknown human face detected, probability 77%**

Where was it finding that, Eleanor wondered? She almost turned to consult with Alex as he appeared to be awake, even if he remained very still. It seemed a shame to rouse him so she turned back to the screen.

How long she had sat and watched the same message and the patiently winking cursor she could not have guessed, but she was vaguely aware that she must have fallen asleep, because she was surely dreaming. The computer hummed and words flew up the screen. The room was bathed in the metal-blue light from the screen, the kerosene lamp being cold and dark by this time, nearly extinguished. Eleanor had never experienced a lucid dream but she thought that this might be one such. She tried to will into being something else, to prove to herself that this was not part of the waking world. She thought of Mike, and as if by powerful magic, there he was.

Mike looked from Eleanor at the desk, over to Alex on the bed, now asleep. In the nearly lightless corridor behind Mike, something stood, a small figure only reaching Mike’s waist. Then, it was only the way in which the shadows fell, the patterns made in the grain of the wood, a trick of the light.

From the bed, Alex spoke, and now Eleanor knew it must be a dream, because Alex was deeply asleep and no-one who was asleep spoke so clearly.

“He’s here,” Alex said.

On the screen, a sentence was repeating, flowing over the screen at a rate which would make it too fast to read, except that each sentence was the same:

**Unknown human face detected, probability 100%**

*Chapter 30: Mike*

When Mike investigated the activity in Alex’s room, he had been surprised – and a little embarrassed – at finding Eleanor there. He had knocked at the door and called out but neither of them had answered. Once actually inside the room, he saw Alex unmoving on the bed and Eleanor hunched trance-like over the computer, itself appearing to be experiencing some sort of nervous breakdown, the same sentence repeating on the screen over and over. Mike wasn’t even sure that Eleanor herself was awake. Then Alex comes up with that line about someone being here, and damned if there hadn’t been a chill movement of the air, and a feeling like having missed, by a fraction of a second, a stranger leaving the room.

“Guys?” Mike tried. He moved further in and tried again. Eleanor looked up from the screen, startled.

“Mike, I can’t help him,” she said. It was only much, much later – when he stood at a cliff edge and watched with exhausted detachment as the sun struggled to rise above a sea the colour of slate – that Mike wondered exactly who it was Eleanor had been talking about.

Mike got them all into their beds as best he could: Alex said nothing but allowed himself to be manhandled; Eleanor, although still confused, was eventually coaxed back into her own room. Mike wondered what to do about the computer – he knew enough not to simply turn the thing off but wasn’t at all sure how he ought to close the program. In the end, he had decided to simply shut the lid of the laptop. The machine whirred for a time, then stopped.

The next morning, Alex slept on, but Eleanor appeared in the dining room only a little past her usual breakfast hour, busying herself in a state of fragile bonhomie.

“What happened last night?” Mike asked as Eleanor clattered about at the sink.

“What do you mean?” Eleanor was shrill with good cheer.

“Alex zonked out on the bed, you slumped over his computer, neither of you speaking – *that’s* what I mean.”

“Nothing *happened* Mike.” Eleanor gripped a mug so hard that her knuckles whitened to bone.

“It didn’t look like nothing, I…” Mike didn’t get to finish. Eleanor whirled around to face him, bright spots of crimson on her cheeks. Her lips thinned, reducing her mouth to a bloodless slit. Not only had Mike never seen Eleanor remotely as annoyed, he would have found it difficult to believe that she *could* be so angry.

“Nothing!” Eleanor repeated, then again, this time almost screaming: “Nothing! That’s what I said, that’s what I meant. Alex had a problem with his computer program and I calmed him down. That’s it – nothing.”

Mike held up his hands in a warding-off gesture. It was only half-joking. “Whoa! Sorry I asked. So, did the problem get fixed?”

“What problem?”

“The problem with the computer program.”

“Yes. No. Not by me, anyway, but I guess it got sorted out. Or will be. Tea?”

He took his tea with Eleanor, who doggedly steered the conversation towards the safest of topics, the weather. They had been advised by the news that a storm was on the way, but there had not been much sign of it until this morning: the sky was bruised with enormous blue-black clouds. Rain seemed to hang suspended in the air, only awaiting its chance to fall. Outside, it was the kind of cold which settles in the bones so profoundly that it is difficult to believe that you could ever be warm again.

Mike got dressed for a trip outside then set off around the building to the workshop. He pottered about, cleaning some equipment, mothballing others, even those he would probably have to bring out again later in the winter. The work was routine enough for time to think, and in the quiet, a new and suddenly appealing thought emerged, as if from nowhere. What if they all just got in the boat and left? Were things going *that* wrong?

Still thinking, Mike checked the generator, then filled up some of the spare lamps with the pungent kerosene. This was stored in metal drums, each one about knee height with a small tap set low down. Mike had to heave the drum on to the bench and then decant the liquid into a device like a long-spouted watering can. He pulled one of the drums out – was it not quite as heavy now as he had remembered it? He dismissed the thought – these unendingly repetitive jobs made it difficult to separate out the days, so maybe they had used more than he had imagined. He opened the tap, and watched, with nothing more than minimal interest, as the kerosene poured out onto the floor, where it soaked into the boards. It was curious stuff, he thought dreamily, looking so much like water. Yet water was the foundation for all life; this stuff was the opposite in many ways – poisonous, flammable, and unnatural. Water was clear, pure; this stuff shimmered with half-colours like a dying rainbow. He carried on watching for a time – he would have no idea how long - as the fluid pattered onto the floor, then set to filling the lamps. The reek of kerosene filled the space, but after a short while, Mike no longer noticed.

He dallied with some other small jobs – categorising screws and putting them in the jam jars which had been set aside as storage, wiping down tools which they had been using, sharpening blades which may or may not have been blunted. It wasn’t that he wanted to stay out of Eleanor’s way, exactly – although that was part of it. More than that, he needed to get his own thoughts clear. It was a strange thing, but when he tried to examine them he found nothing distinct, like peering into smog hoping to see a familiar landmark and finding only things unfamiliar and strange. Eleanor’s blankness the night before had been an uncomfortable reflection of his own – since they had arrived on the island, his recollections were muddied, his feelings were numbed and blunted, subtly *reduced*. He would have been hard-pressed to describe exactly what that meant, but it felt very real. As if every decision was better deferred, every action best delayed. At times, some of his memories of the world outside took on a patina of antiquity, as if of another age. The sights and sounds of the island, on the other hand, were technicolour bright, like a freshly created theatre set.

A gust of wind rattled the workshop door. Through the window Mike saw the tough grasses outside flatten and realised that this was the promised storm arriving at last. He finished up in the workroom, then decided to go and secure the boat. Even within the few minutes it took him to walk down to the little harbour the weather had deteriorated: the horizon was already lost in an angry haze. As the clouds boiled above, so the sea below frothed in the gathering wind. His fingers fumbled with the stiffening ropes which held the boat, which had started to bob and crash alarmingly against the rocks, despite being in what was allegedly the island’s most sheltered spot. Mike glanced back at the chalet and saw a light in the window – it had become that dark, and that quickly. (*But surely he had not spent the best part of the day dabbling in the workshop?*) In the time it took Mike to stagger across to the front of the building, the storm arrived in force, heaving with frightful glee.

The shrieking gale threatened to rip the chalet’s front door out of Mike’s hands as he opened it – he had to hold fast with all his strength just to stop it from crashing back against the wall.

“Are you OK?” Eleanor asked, turning from the sink in the kitchen. Mike decided that while the storm raged he wouldn’t do anything that risked the return of the unfamiliar, snarling Eleanor he had seen earlier. Maybe when the tempest blew itself out, he could return to the subject of the night before, but for now, he was pleased to have a little company and to be able to share the warmth of the cabin. He stripped off his outer layers and then got the log-burner going, thankful that they had already laid in a supply which now formed a tottering wall of fuel. Eleanor came to join him and they sat together on one of the battered sofas, watching the flames dance and listening to the wild hunt begin its chase outside.

*Chapter 31: Eleanor*

Eleanor still marvelled at herself, even days later, standing up to Mike! She could see that it had surprised him but it had shocked her even more. She could not remember ever having spoken to anyone so angrily. God knew, she had been provoked enough in the past, not least by her own mother, limitlessly demanding, relentlessly undemonstrative. Times without number, she had put others before herself and they hadn’t even noticed as they scrambled over her in their headlong rush to promote themselves.

What was really surprising Eleanor now was a burgeoning sense of being the member of their party in control. Clearly Mike badly wanted to ask her again about the night he had found her in Alex’s room – but he was avoiding bringing up the subject. Mike was wary of *her*! That anyone could be cautious around her was a concept so unusual that Eleanor did her best to savour it, examine it wonderingly, whenever she could.

Alex had eventually emerged from his room after the night of the computer glitch, claiming that he had solved the problems with his program, but since then he had been very quiet, steadfastly refusing to demonstrate the supposedly repaired program to Eleanor. She suspected that all was not really well. She ached to help him, for him to be better and for her to have played her part.

The storm, for all of its ferocity, had caused surprisingly little damage – a fact which Mike attributed to their (or, strictly unspoken, just *his*) expertise in getting the island readied for the winter. The roof stayed on, he was able to report that the boat was still in one piece, windows and doors were intact.

Something had shifted the balance of power in their tiny community – not the storm, but something arising out of the storm, perhaps. Mike had seen the worm turn when Eleanor had snapped back at him that morning. Alex had gone to her when he had needed help. She increasingly felt as if she was becoming the materfamilias she had always wanted to be. Maybe that was the power of their island – transforming the helpless and the hopeless into what they could always have been.

\* \* \*

As November gave way to December the party stayed indoors for longer, venturing outside later in the day and returning more frequently to warm themselves in front of the log burner, which was now kept alight day and night. Winds blew unimpeded from the North, months-long exhalations over the great expanses of Arctic ice. In her dreams, Eleanor relived the day the land had seemed to tilt and slide away beneath her, sometimes the nightmare taking her all the way to the cliff edge and over, and she found that it didn’t scare her so much anymore. Something else the island had done for her, beyond her liberation as a woman, she decided: it had shown that the there was no real division between reality and fantasy. One day, she thought, on the very *next* day which is not too terribly bitter, I’ll walk out again, perhaps see if the island doesn’t oblige me by tipping me right out into space. And this time, she promised, I won’t cling to the rock. I will let it cast me out and I will find out if I can fly.

Days which weren’t so cold were few and far between now, so it was weeks before Eleanor found herself outside for any length of time, with Alex and Mike on the coastal walk recording flotsam washed onto the shore. She looked around her and thought brightly: *This is the day I’ve waited for!*

“I’m going to stay out for a bit,” she told them.

Alex mumbled something, staring at the ground. Around Mike, Eleanor noted, Alex often reverted to a younger self, the very picture of awkwardness.

“See you later,” she said airily, and set off up the path towards the crest of the island. As she ascended, it struck her that she had not been up that way since the day she and Alex had taken the photographs. The very photographs which had led to – to *what*, exactly? Computer breakdown? *Alex’s* breakdown? What she was looking at as she made her way along the path was scene-for-scene what had unfolded on Alex’s computer. She hadn’t told Alex (and had *certainly* not mentioned it to Mike) but the pictures had exerted an almost hypnotic effect on her that evening; she had told Alex that she saw nothing in them, which had been absolutely true. What she hadn’t let him know was that the pictures came back to her like the after-images of a flash of lightning, hours later when she was somewhere in the thin lands that come before dreams begin. Exactly the same, but for one crucial detail; in the images she imagined then, there *was* a figure: a child which skittered across the scrubland, a figure that grew clearer in rapid stages, through one photograph after another, rushing toward her.

Today, the sun was bright and the whole landscape was in unceasing movement. The gulls never stopped their looping flights, circling hungrily over the world below. They called and called, forlorn questions with no expectation of an answer. Eleanor wondered if the gulls ever felt cold, if they resented having to dip their big orange feet into the chill waters, hated their nests, barely more than bundles of twigs on cliff faces exposed to constant rain and wind. Listening to the creatures shrieking over the incessant winds, it didn’t seem so fanciful to think that they might be consumed with furious anger.

As she approached the Summit, Eleanor wished that she had thought to bring some water. She found a suitable place to stop and sat, looking out to sea. From where she was, she saw no obvious trace of humanity – their temporary home below was hidden from view, there were no boats visible on the sea, no contrails of planes in the skies above. It was a glimpse of the world with mankind purged.

Eleanor shut her eyes and relaxed. The rock cradled her like a hand cupping her in its palm and she started to doze. She was no longer afraid. She and the island had reached a kind of accommodation. Then all coherent thought dissolved away and she slept.

When she woke the sun had shifted in the sky, but not by much – she reckoned that she might have been asleep for thirty minutes, forty-five at most. Even so, the light had changed, less bright and somehow not so kindly. Seabirds still flew around her but lower now, with more deliberate purpose. Eleanor felt a buzz of excitement. Perhaps the island would show its true face, hidden beneath the skin-deep thinness of its ancient façade. For all the apparent solidity of the ancient rocks, she knew that the aspect her island showed to the world was as insubstantial as old vellum, pulled tight to the point of its disintegration and beneath that public face was another. Then perhaps another and another, realities stacked one over another forever. Well, if that was true, then Eleanor was more than ready to leave this world behind and explore the next. She would close her eyes and have faith that when she opened them again, she would be somewhere else, somewhere she would be recognised as the woman she had become. So Eleanor closed her eyes and counted slowly, determinedly, to one hundred.

*Ready or not, here I come!*

She opened her eyes but nothing had changed.

Absurdly, she felt the itch of hot tears. Had she really thought that escaping reality would be so easy? Had she really supposed that people every day, in situations far worse than hers, did not pray that they could slip across the spaces that divided worlds to find themselves someplace better? And did that ever work, did she believe? Silly, silly Eleanor. And how very much like the Eleanor she had always been at heart. She got up and brushed herself down, slapping at her clothing furiously.

She looked back the way she would go and saw a child. It was too far away to make out any detail, the quality of the light having become flat and ugly. The figure was unmoving, like an image crudely cut out of the landscape, a space in human form. There was something else wrong, Eleanor felt, although at first she couldn’t have said what it was. Then, suddenly and with a feeling of cold terror, Eleanor could see that the feet did not touch the ground.

Eleanor expected her world to heave again as it had before but it stayed stable around her. A dark cloud passed overhead and in that moment, what she was seeing resolved itself into a tangle of vegetation for limbs; the heft of a slab of rock was the body. She screwed her eyes closed until her heart resumed something that approached its normal rate.

*Chapter 32: Mike*

Mike had a strangely detached feeling that he should have been worried long before he actually was. Eleanor out wandering: no big deal. Eleanor in the near-dark: she would almost certainly be back soon, strolling in and laughing at their fears. Eleanor not back for their evening meal: unusual, but not alarming. All the time some part of Mike insisted that there *was* something wrong, both with the situation right then and *let’s be honest, now, the hour is late*; maybe since they had taken their very first steps on the island. Now Eleanor, all bright smiles as fragile as blown glass, had given a cheery wave and had disappeared towards somewhere which was treacherous given the weather and the rapidly dying light. Expecting help from Alex in his present unresponsive condition was hopeful, to say the least.

Mike glanced over at the radio and was struck by an unprompted thought. *When had they last used it, exactly?* He couldn’t remember and wasn’t that failure of memory exactly the problem? The three of them had become little better than automata, going through the motions of life on the island, but all the time their higher faculties closing down. The outside world had faded from memory, leaving the island as their sole reality. The insight felt hard-won, as if it had struggled up from a great depth, after being submerged by a powerful and secret hand.

Full of resolve, Mike strode over to the radio and thumbed the switch to turn it on. Without much surprise he found that there was no response, none of the reassuring static which meant that the kit had its listening ears on. Yet if everything on the island had gone silent, why hadn’t the coastguards checked on them, or the local fishermen? And could he recall their names? He could not, and that seemed wrong too, although he forced the worry away, to be dealt with another time. Where was Haigh? Why hadn’t *he* investigated their radio silence?

Mike toggled all the available switches, twisted the dials and still got nothing.

“Alex…” he began. Alex looked over at him, hair falling over unfocussed eyes. Alex hadn’t shaved for…days? Weeks? It was as if Mike saw Alex properly for the first time in an age and suddenly realised that Alex looked beyond awful. How was it possible that he had not noticed before? And what about Eleanor? Overflowing as she was with maternal attention, how was it possible that she had missed what was happening? What was *wrong* with them all?

“I’m going to have a look at the boat,” Mike informed Alex. “You stay here, in case Eleanor comes back.”

Alex maintained his blank stare.

When Mike stepped outside the warmth was sucked out of him immediately. The illumination cast by his lamp was ridiculously, pathetically small against the vast expanse of the night. An unshakeable thought occurred to him then: his tiny flickering light would attract the interest of a gigantic and hostile god as it strode across the world and, having noticed him, it would be the work of a moment for the monster to crush him and move on without a backward glance.

He hurried down to the quayside as fast as he dared. As he approached the harbour he struggled at first to make sense of what he was seeing. The craft lay low and crooked, the sea lapping into the cabin. He got to the mooring and knelt, unsure that his legs would still support him. The boat had sunk, with only the listing cabin still remaining above the level of the water. Even in the gathering dusk, he could see that one shattered side of the craft projected upwards in jagged fingers. Mike reeled away from the devastation and sat down on a hillock of grass.

His mind raced with impossible thoughts – the broken boat – the boat he was supposed to be looking after - was clearly never going to get them back to the mainland. But when had that happened? He had checked it after the storm, hadn’t he? He tried to clear his head, tried to remember, but they only thing he could recall was fire and choking smoke.

Finally he had to admit that there had been no check, despite what he had told the others – and they had never ventured down to investigate for themselves, either. In that case, what about everything else? Had they really been so lucky with the course of the storm, leaving everything intact – or had it undone all their previous work? What exactly had they been doing since the storm? It wasn’t that there were no memories at all – more that what could be brought to mind had the horrible slippery quality of a fish drawn out of water. Just as Mike thought he could bring some recollection into the centre of his attention, it swam away. Continually, an animal part of his brain shrieked an ancient warning, repulsed by the filthy search through these greasy memories. Mike had to bear down hard to catch one, but he did, and he felt his stomach drop. He saw them – all three islanders – looking at the boat, with the craft taking on water. He saw them watch for a time, then Alex pick up a pebble and nonchalantly skim it over the waves. Mike had nodded approvingly as the stone skipped a half-dozen times before it disappeared. A little desultory discussion, then they had all turned away, returning to the building, and Mike had forgotten *all of* *that*? How was it possible?

He stood up, buffeted by a gust of wind which sent him staggering, his balance temporarily gone. He windmilled his arms to straighten himself, then stood for a full minute, letting the cold seep into him, hoping it would shock him into normality. Then he set off back to the chalet.

Alex was more or less where Mike had left him, but when Mike came in Alex’s previously blank expression was replaced by a knowing smirk. Mike stripped off his outer layers, pulling the gear inside-out in his haste and leaving it pooled on the floor, an untidiness they had been careful to avoid in all their time together.

“Something amusing you?” Mike asked.

Alex carried on staring. Mike strode across the room and took Alex’s shoulders in his hands to look the other man in the eyes.

To Mike’s annoyance, Alex’s gaze fixed on a point over Mike’s shoulder, as if there was someone standing behind. Mike had an urge to shake him, hard. Alex was like a fucking child, Mike thought wildly. That was an uncomfortable image itself, of course – would Mike shake a child?

*There is worse than shaking.*

The voice that had spoken up in Mike’s head was so clear, its tone so sardonic, that Mike could not be sure for a second or two if it had actually been spoken out loud. It wouldn’t be the craziest thing to have happened to him recently.

Alex glanced at Mike and nodded, then dropped his head down so that his limp hair fell back across his face. Mike fought back a renewed urge to shake – to *hurt* – and instead, tightened his grip to force Alex to meet his own gaze.

“Alex, this is important,” he said.

Alex sagged further.

“Eleanor has gone missing. I don’t know where she is, but she went off hours ago and she can’t stay out there in the night. We have to find her.” It was like explaining something important to a child or an imbecile.

Had Alex twitched a little on hearing Eleanor’s name? Mike couldn’t be sure, but he decided to try again.

“The boat is gone, sunk. The radio is broken.” *Someone has sunk the boat. Someone broke the radio. Was it* you *Alex?* He had to get those thoughts out of his head – to admit them would edge him closer to taking his fists to Alex and he was perilously close to that already. And once he got started down that road, there was no-one around to stop him.

“There’s nobody else to help her. It’s just us. We’re on our own.”

At last Alex looked directly at Mike and this time held the scrutiny. “Are you sure about that?” he asked.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Mike shouted, not now caring if he frightened Alex – or if he hurt him, come to that. Mike allowed his fingers to sink further into the thin flesh of Alex’s shoulders, and for a wild and exhilarating moment he hoped it *did* hurt.

Alex looked more offended than hurting. “My program has been telling me that there is someone else here on the island with us. I didn’t trust it but I should have done. I should have trusted what it told me because it can’t be wrong.”

Alex pulled himself away.

Mike felt his anger drain, a tempest which had already blown itself out. It left him feeling sick with a toxic mix of adrenaline and guilt.

“Who is it?” Mike demanded. “*Who* is here with us? Do you know?”

Alex shook his head. “I don’t know. I never see anything, I’ve never seen anyone but the machine *knows*, it can see the patterns in the pictures. Let me show you.”

“We haven’t got time for this, Alex. Whether or not there is anyone else here with us, we have to get Eleanor home. In fact that’s even more important if there really *is* someone else on the island.”

Alex backed up. “I don’t want to go out there,” he said, gesturing towards the window, now merely a hole in the wall into a black void.

“Eleanor would do it for *you*,” Mike snapped.

“Yes,” he said, “She would.” As if that settled the matter, he retreated to his room.

Mike stared after him, then started to step back into the all-weather clothes he had dropped on the floor earlier. They were already cold and damp and he had to spend time pulling the sleeves through. The lantern was still alight and he snatched it up, hearing the fuel splash. He had to hope that it would be enough to last. Finally, he was ready to go and he stepped outside again. Within a few moments he was around the side of the building and heading up the path.

Rushing out of the darkness, a figure fell on him, knocking the sputtering oil lamp tumbling into the grass.

*Chapter 33: Alex*

Alex would have sympathised with Mike’s growing distress about his amnesia – Alex had always felt a pride in his memory which was, by any standard, phenomenally good. It had been the saving grace of his condition when he was younger. Other kids couldn’t understand his social clumsiness, nor did they tend to share his consuming passion for numbers – yet they *did* recognise that the ability to remember stuff might be pretty cool. The young Alex read and memorised vast quantities of information on topics in which he had little immediate interest – cricket statistics, for example, to impress his schoolmates. So the ability to recall information was something with which Alex had always felt more than comfortable, a bridge between his often austere and lonely world of quantity and colour and the rumbustious but essentially *normal* world of his peers.

“I don’t remember,” he said to himself: “I don’t remember.” He laughed, thinking of a joke he had once heard:

*Doctor, Doctor, I think I’m suffering from short term memory loss.*

*And how long has this been going on?*

*I don’t remember.*

That was a funny joke, he thought, and he even understood *why*, which delighted him even further. Mike had been annoying, Alex decided, but already the details of what Mike had spoken about were fading, making Alex anxious. He hated to forget things, to have the sense that there was information inexorably ebbing away.

He reached for his laptop to take away the anxiety and switched it on - a message flashed up to say that the power was low, and Alex made a mental note to get the machine charged up again at the first opportunity. Then that thought too dwindled and disappeared in its turn.

Alex alternated between enabling the machine’s speech function, then finding the voice tedious and switching it off again. At the moment, the voice was back on. It soothed him to hear the machine speak, a human voice but without all the myriad puzzling emotional undertones of an actual person. He wondered vaguely why he made the voice that of a child – *and* *had that always been the case?* - but he felt that thought evaporate too. It couldn’t be terribly important.

He instructed the computer to access its camera, and a small window opened up on the screen to show his own face, framed by the room over his shoulder.

**He’s here.**

**He’s here.**

**He’s here.**

Alex sat staring into the screen for a long time after that, until the words which he repeated under his breath lost their meaning.

*Chapter 34: Mike*

Mike had shouted out when he had fallen and the figure on top of him screamed too. There had been a few seconds of pure animal instinct when Mike would have punched and bitten and fought without restraint, but that time was gone with Mike too stunned to move, too winded even to call out. In the interval it took for that long moment to pass, he realised that it was Eleanor who had run him down. He tried to hold her tight to his chest so she could not slip away again.

They carefully disentangled themselves from each other, Mike scrambling across the grass to fetch the lamp, somehow still burning, casting shadows which leapt around them with dark vitality.

“Where have you been?” Mike said.

Eleanor sat very still, head cocked to one side as if she was straining to listen. “I need to get inside, Mike,” she said. Mike looked at her and other memories began to surface. Another woman, harrowed lines etched into her face, weary with the inconceivable made flesh. Some part of him understood that it would be dangerous to entertain that particular memory right now, so that too was forced away.

“Let’s get inside, then,” he said. He went to help Eleanor up and she attached herself to his arm, hanging on him with what seemed to be all her weight. Linked together, they made their way back.

Once inside, with Eleanor on the sofa, Mike decided that he would get Alex out of his room to hold an emergency council. They had to address what he had discovered down at the harbour, and soon. Leaving the matter until the next day risked it all being (*forgotten*?) swept under the carpet. He knocked on Alex’s door and walked in.

“You need to come out,” Mike said.

“You brought Eleanor back.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I think we need to talk about everything that’s happening. Together.”

The computer spoke, once, then fell silent.

“What did it say?” Mike asked.

“It’s telling me that it’s still broken,” Alex said, grinning a jester’s disingenuous smile. Then he snapped the laptop’s screen down and stood up to join Mike at the door.

*Chapter 35: Mike, Alex and Eleanor*

“We need to talk about what’s going on here,” Mike said as they sat down.

“I’m not sure I want to do that,” Eleanor said flatly.

“I don’t think we have a choice. First,” he counted off on his fingers. “The radio is dead. Either of you remember that happening? Or when we last used the thing – who we spoke to, for example?”

Eleanor and Alex looked at each other and shook their heads, an action which might have been comically synchronous under other circumstances.

“OK, me neither. Second, the boat has sunk. Probably smashed against rocks, possibly sabotaged. Either of you know anything about *that*?”

“Sabotaged?” Eleanor parroted. Mike had expected shock, outrage even. In contrast, the other two were preternaturally calm, bordering on the disinterested.

“Possibly. More likely an accident. The real question is: why we didn’t check on it before today? What the hell have we been doing?”

“I thought the boat was *your* responsibility,” Alex said. It was the first comment he had made since emerging from his room.

“Oh really?” Mike had to work hard to keep his anger in check. The little prick was getting surprisingly accomplished at pushing his buttons – this was twice in one day Mike had felt like battering him.

“You always seem to be…in charge,” Eleanor added.

*Like all good mothers, covering up for her can-do-wrong little boy’s shortcomings.* With an almost physical sensation of loosening, Mike felt his self-control slip another notch.

“Yeah,” Alex chipped in.

Mike took a deep breath. “I’ve got to tell you, it doesn’t feel that way. More like, we’re all in this together,” Mike told them. “Anyway, more to the point none of us seemed to notice, or care – or even remember. Maybe you two wouldn’t go and check the boat – but are you telling me that neither of you noticed there was no traffic on the radio? Doesn’t that strike you as maybe just a little bit odd?”

Eleanor and Alex looked at each other again. They were like a pair of puppets, Mike thought and it grated on him like sand in gears.

“What happened to you out there?” he asked Eleanor. “You seemed pretty scared when we bumped into each other.”

“I was just a bit lost, Mike. I was frightened.” In a flash of insight, Mike could understand that it was like talking to someone rehearsing a script. *Have we reached the point where reality is so far distant?*

“You were more than just a bit scared. You were clinging on to me like grim death. After attacking me, of course.”

“Oh no,” Eleanor said. As she spoke, she turned to cast another quick glance at Alex, and Mike was sure that he saw the beginnings of sly smiles touch the corners of their mouths. As if they shared some rotten secret.

“What about you?” Mike turned his attention to Alex.

“Me?”

“Yes, you…how are you feeling? No worries? Your computer program all better now, is it?” All three sat with gazes that flitted from one to the other.

In the burner, a log popped and punctured the silence, making all three jump.

“The program isn’t broken,” Alex said finally, then added: “I don’t *think* it’s broken.” He was choosing his words with the careful enunciation of a drunk.

“So what do you think is happening?” Mike prompted. Alex looked back at him blankly. “What’s the matter with it?”

Alex considered again, then replied, slowly, almost dreamily. “It recognises patterns. It knows a human form – looking at a person, or a picture of a person. But *we* don’t see what it can see. I think the program is seeing what we *can’t* see – it’s *better* than we are.”

“So exactly what do you think it’s able to see that we can’t, Alex?”

“Images of people who aren’t there,” Alex explained patiently. Again, Mike got the distinct feeling of being patronised and, however ridiculous that was given their present circumstances, it stung.

“Ghosts,” Eleanor exclaimed, proud of her insight.

Mike didn’t know if he was supposed to take that seriously. “Ghosts?” he repeated incredulously.

“Is that so mad?” Eleanor asked. “What do you call people who are there but who we can’t see? What would *you* call them, Michael?”

Mike looked to Alex; whatever else he might be, Alex was surely a pragmatist. Mike guessed that it would not come as welcome news to any bona-fide scientist to find out that your revolutionary pattern-recognition device had just become the latest must-have equipment for ghost-hunters. Alex stared back. As if guessing what Mike was thinking he nodded slowly.

“Alex?” Mike said.

“If it sees things that we can’t see, I’m prepared to believe that the machine might be seeing what we would describe as ghosts. For the program itself, they would only be patterns. It’s up to us what we call them.”

“See!” Eleanor fairly shrieked, very loud in the quiet of the room. “Alex says they *are* ghosts, and it’s *his* program.”

Mike felt his anger become tinged with a quiet desperation: Eleanor’s was the logic of the mad and disenfranchised. They had been travelling step by step into a realm where this upside-down reasoning had become the norm and now the way back looked in danger of being lost.

“So what is it – the ghost of the boogie-woogie bugle boy from the cave? You said yourself that it was a made-up story to frighten the tourists.” Or *had* she said that, in fact? He found that he couldn’t rightly remember. “For God’s sake, hardly anyone has ever *lived* on this rock, let alone died here. Don’t you need a few corpses before you get a ghost?”

“Don’t talk about the island like that! Don’t make fun of it! Don’t make fun of me!” Eleanor was on her feet, shouting. “This is my *home* now, so don’t you *dare* make fun.”

Mike teetered on the absolute edge of his last reserve of calm, so he had to force himself to answer as coolly as possible. “I don’t want to make fun of you. Either of you. But you have both got to listen to what you’re saying.” He turned to Alex. “With a rational head, Alex.”

Alex held up his hands, mimicking the action of pushing something heavy away from him. “Please don’t shout,” he said. “Rational head on,” he told them and pretended to be screwing his head onto his neck. “Point one: my program is picking up something. What is it? I’ve no idea, but I don’t think the program is corrupt. I can’t find anything wrong with the code, and I’ve searched with great care, believe me. Therefore, I accept that it does see *something*. So, let’s take that as a given. Call it whatever you wish but it seems to me that calling it a ghost is as good a description as any for the moment.”

“We have to accept whatever there is!” Eleanor nearly yelled.

“So, we have to be ready to admit that there is something on the island with us. You say that the radio and the boat are both out of action…” Alex began.

“Don’t take my word for it – have a look for yourselves, be my guests.”

“I think I will,” said Eleanor, marching across to the radio.

She twisted the dial and static sputtered. She held up the transmitter unit with a thin and unlovely smirk.

*Chapter 36: Mike*

“It was dead!” Mike shouted and went to snatch the handset from Eleanor. She twisted away, pulling it to her chest, making the connecting cable curl around her.

“Give it to me!” Mike said, aiming to sound authoritative but achieving only petulance. He held out a hand. Eleanor clasped the mouthpiece even tighter.

“It was all some sort of game, Alex,” Eleanor was saying as Mike moved closer to her. “Go and take a look at the boat. I’ll bet there’s nothing wrong with it, unless he sabotaged it himself. Go and look!”

Alex pushed himself off the sofa and went to pull on some of the wet weather gear strewn about the floor. As he did, Mike took advantage of the distraction to make another grab for the handset.

Eleanor, with the coiled cable still wrapped around her, tried to duck under his arm but slipped. As she fell, she pulled on the radio set, which began a slow but inexorable slide off the counter. Mike made another grab, but Eleanor scooted backwards across the floor. Too late, Mike saw the radio beginning to fall.

He managed to get one hand to it but his feet became tangled so he fell forward, clutching reflexively at the machine only to drag it down with him. The radio crashed onto the floor and as it did Eleanor scuttled further back. The wire which connected the handset to the radio itself, already stretched taut, abruptly ripped out of the set altogether.

The two of them sat, almost toe to toe, staring in silent amazement at the wreckage around them.

“You stupid bitch,” Mike said wonderingly. “The radio was OK all along, but you’ve managed to fuck it up royally now.”

“It was you!” she said. “*You’re* the one who broke it. You said it was already broken and that was a lie!”

She was still holding the handset and held it out towards Mike, as if challenging him to deny the evidence she waved in front of his eyes.

At the doorway, Alex was frozen mid-way through putting his arm into a sleeve, and simply stood mouth agape, looking from Mike to Eleanor and back again, like a child who has happened across a ferocious parental argument.

Mike was thinking furiously, trying to imagine his next moves. The broken radio seemed a perfect metaphor for what was happening to them – a gradual shutting down, their isolation increasing, first in tiny steps, then by giant bounds. The events seemed too well choreographed to be down to chance. Why had the radio worked for her but not for him? Had he missed something obvious, forgotten to switch it on, perhaps? It seemed impossible: he was the one who used the thing most often. But then, more than a few things had slipped his mind just recently, hadn’t they? Perhaps this was just one more faulty memory.

“Come on then,” Mike said to Alex. “We’ll go and check out the boat together. Can’t both be wrong, can we? *She* might believe it if we both come back with the same story.” Mike untangled himself from the remains of the radio as he spoke. Eleanor kept a wary distance.

Alex glanced at Eleanor, who nodded her head in agreement so he carried on the laborious process of preparing for the outdoors. Mike dragged his clothing out of the door to get changed outside. It felt better not to be sharing the space with Eleanor.

Outside, the weather, always changeable, seemed to be trembling on the cusp of a moment of drama. Mike recognised the head-achingly heavy air of the moments before a thunderstorm broke. There was that, and more, something which scrambled desperately in the most ancient parts of his physiology. A feeling which urged him to flee, immediately, without another thought.

Alex joined Mike outside and together they tramped down to the mooring where, with spiteful glee, Mike spread his hands to indicate the ruined boat. “See?”

Alex stood and looked, impassive. As the seconds dragged by, a horrible certainty began to form in Mike’s mind, that Alex did not see what Mike saw. Perhaps Alex was looking at the boat whole and undamaged, and was wondering, in his methodical way, how he would break the news to Mike. How exactly *would* you tell someone – especially someone you already suspected might be a dangerous psycho – that they were seeing things?

Then Alex turned to look at Mike. Alex’s mouth hung open again, exactly in the idiot way it had after witnessing the struggle between Mike and Eleanor. *Or call it what it was*, thought Mike – *the fight*. At that moment Mike knew that, whatever else was going on, at least he wasn’t imagining things. There was even a numbing sense of momentary relief. The radio was smashed, so was the boat, but people had got through worse situations than this if they just used their brains. There were other much darker thoughts that also tried to crowd in but from those, Mike turned resolutely away.

*Chapter 37: Alex*

Alex worked hard to process all the information, buzzing in his head like a cloud of wasps, each individual datum almost imperceptible but the whole mass angry and dangerous. He dug deep, trying to find a safe mental distance from the people with whom he found himself trapped. Reduce the big problem to smaller problems, he reminded himself fiercely, find a silver cord amongst the chaos and then follow it wherever it leads until a solid, sensible conclusion is reached. Find, solve, repeat. He tried to concentrate his physical resources on regular breathing so that gradually Mike’s presence became less oppressive, the recent memory of the fight and the destruction of the radio ceased to be so alarming. He could almost feel the relief if he just allowed himself to forget all these distressing things.

All that done, Alex tried to re-assemble the facts of the matter. He imagined them lined up like unruly members of an identity parade: Mike, Eleanor, the boat, the radio, something else…but suddenly, that approach wasn’t working. Alex had always operated best with the abstract, so the unruly human element didn’t help.

He tried again, a part of him very dimly aware that back in the real world, Mike awaited a response to some question.

“I see it’s broken,” Alex allowed. “It’s sunk.” Alex noticed, without much surprise, that it was a little easier to concentrate out here on the mooring, on the edge of the sea, than it was indoors. Not by much, but a little. That suggested something else to him as well but he didn’t want to chase that particular thought not least because it spoke to him not in colours this time, but in a distant yet now familiar reek.

Alex forced his thinking to the abstract, the facts transforming into soothing patterns, numbers which mutated into different hues. He let the thoughts coalesce and then rupture again in immaterial rainbows, invisible to anyone except himself.

Calmer, he turned back to Mike. “Eleanor,” he said simply and then started up the path again, stiff-legged and lumbering in the bulky water-proofs.

“Just hold on,” Mike shouted after the rapidly departing figure. Alex came to an abrupt halt, swaying where he stood. “Come back in with me.”

Alex cocked his head, for all the world looking as if he was listening to the voice of an invisible advisor before he slowly turned and lurched back to Mike.

Back in the cabin, Eleanor was gone.

“Jesus,” Mike whispered. They began a frantic search of the building - Mike even looking under her bed, in case she was hiding there. It was clear that she had gone back again into the falling night.

“So now what?” Mike asked Alex. “Do we go out looking for her?”

Alex wondered why Mike was asking *him*. Wasn’t Mike the one who always wanted to be *in charge*? Which meant, almost by definition, that you were the one who had to make the decisions when things were going belly-up. “Yes. Of course we go and look for her. She might be in danger.”

It seemed that this was not the answer Mike was hoping for. “Perhaps we shouldn’t,” he explained. “It puts us all at risk. Maybe it would be better to wait until morning.” Was Mike simply hoping for Alex to rubber-stamp his own reluctance to start a search in the dark? Alex couldn’t be sure.

“But what if Eleanor needs our help?” Alex said.

“Then she shouldn’t have run off,” Mike snapped. “But you’re right, we do need to find her. Sit down, let’s make a plan.”

Alex could appreciate the logic, but at the same time he was nervous about finding himself alone with Mike. Alex knew instinctively that Eleanor would try to protect him – he was no longer so sure about Mike, who had once appeared so solid and dependable. When they came to sit together, Alex was careful to position himself as far away as possible from Mike. He rehearsed in his imagination scenarios allowing him to escape if the worst happened.

“Alex, we need to talk this through. Will you do that?” Mike shifted a little closer to Alex, who had to fight an impulse to subtly slide himself further away.

Alex nodded.

“Good, good.” Mike settled back, allowing Alex an opportunity to relax infinitesimally. “Let’s get a few things into the open. Give us a chance to think about them. One: we’re stuck here. No radio, no boat, no means of contacting the outside world. That may not be as bad as it seems, because at some point the outside world will want to contact *us* and won’t be able to. Then, I guess someone will come looking and we only need to wait for as long as that takes – a few days, a couple of weeks at the very worst, and we’ve got supplies to last for months if necessary. We’ve got everything we need, right here on the island, to keep us going until rescue comes, even if that’s not until next spring. Which it won’t be.”

Alex nodded again. Mike moved on to his second point.

“Two – and this is the real problem, because as I’ve said, being trapped on the island may be the least of our worries. “ Mike looked down at his hands, squeezed hard between his knees. He paused. “How’s your memory, Alex? Can you remember the last time you…let’s say for the sake of the argument, the last time you *saw* the boat? Before today, of course.”

Alex tried to peer dispassionately into his recollections, only finding a rising flood of dread. He slammed down the mental hatch urgently. “I can’t remember anything much, Mike, not about…well, about anything. When I try to focus on anything in particular, it kind of slips away.”

“Exactly!” Mike exclaimed fiercely. Alex flinched and Mike held up his hands in apology. “Sorry. But you’re dead right. That’s exactly what’s been happening to me as well. And although it sometimes gets a bit clearer; some places around the island are worse than others – down by the beach, things seemed easier, for example – but nowhere on the island do things ever seem to be right, exactly.”

“I agree. At first I thought there was something wrong with the program,” Alex said. “I thought it was making mistakes. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Because of the ghosts?”

Alex shrugged. “If that’s what you want to call them.”

“What do *you* want to call them?”

“I don’t know.” Alex almost petulant now, child-like. “*Anomalies*, maybe.”

“I know how it all sounds,” Mike said. “At least I do when I’m thinking straight.”

Outside the wind howled, rattling the windows in their frames. Mike stooped from the sofa to load some more logs into the burner. Close to the stove the faces of the two men glowed with reflected heat, but they could feel the pervasive cold at their backs. There was a shared awareness too obvious to be spoken aloud that if the fire was extinguished the temperature in the cabin would plummet within minutes.

“Mike?” Alex was suddenly aware that time had passed and Mike was still staring into the open door of the stove.

Mike looked around. “Sorry,” he said. “I was miles away.”

“You were saying that we’re both finding it difficult keep our focus on what’s important,” Alex stated cautiously.

“And what do you think is causing that?”

“Could be one of any number of things. Or a combination of them.”

“Give me an illustration.”

Alex considered. “Environmental factors – something in the air. Something in the water.” He held up a finger, an unconscious picture of the classic ‘eureka’ moment. “The water! Have we checked the filters?”

“That’s right – state of the art, Haigh said, didn’t he? Let’s check it out tomorrow.”

Outside, the night was complete – any opportunity they may have had to search for Eleanor in the light was gone. Alex found that the thought hardly alarmed him at all.

*Chapter 38: Mike*

Not for the first time, Mike had to struggle to recover a memory, but it eventually surfaced, bloated like a thing long-drowned. When they had their first ever tour of the island, months before, Haigh had pointed out the reservoir (in reality a pond of peaty water) but had made it clear to them, not-to-worry, there was a modern filtering system, they wouldn’t be poisoned. The machinery had been buried, Mike recalled, but he felt that he would find it easily enough and Haigh had shown them spare filters in the workroom. He wondered if everything they had been experiencing – the visions, the failing memory, the violent swings of emotion – could all be due to something as straightforward as bad water. The narrative had a compelling sense to it, Mike had to admit and allowed of a very easy remedy – fit the new filters, explain the situation to Eleanor, tidy up the mess they had left, then wait for one of the fishermen or a coastguard to sail by, and *hey presto*, crisis averted.

“No,” Mike repeated, mostly to himself. “I don’t believe we have checked those water filters.”

They decided not to drink any more water until they had changed over the filters, then settled to their first night without Eleanor, agreeing that, if she didn’t return before first light, they would start a search as soon as possible in the morning. Mike found himself in bed, preparing to sleep, having managed again to drive disquieting thoughts about Eleanor out of his mind. She would come creeping back, Mike reckoned, when she got cold enough. And at this time of year she would get cold enough pretty damn quickly. That in turn set him off wondering exactly when had he last been completely sure of the date? Was he sure even of the month? No later than early December? Or was it nearer to Christmas? If *that* was the case rescue might be delayed, he began to think. The local fishing crews might well take a few days of holiday and whilst the coastguards wouldn’t be taking time off, perhaps they wouldn’t be quite as vigilant as usual. Maybe, maybe not. Then all these thoughts were hurried away and Mike slept.

Dreams were not long in coming, cold as the icy winds that excoriated the island now. He found himself on a long road, sometimes walking, sometimes as a driver, scenes shifting from one to the other in the molten way of nightmares, ambiguous and thin. The almost featureless scenery rolled by at the same speed however he moved, but anything on which he tried to focus as he passed slid away in a formless blur. He realised, without surprise, that the fogginess of his waking life had followed him into the dreamlands. Suddenly, in the space between heartbeats, a shadow in the darkness zig-zagged towards him up the road to meet him with a frightful metallic scream.

Mike awoke with a start, gasping for air, long breaths which burnt in his throat. Something fluttered at his face and he waved it away. Then the thing had lit upon his hand and he shook his arms violently, twisting away. He lost his purchase on the bed completely and slithered to the floor, bringing with him something that clattered in the darkness. From his new vantage point he could see that what had been flapping around him was only one of the curtains. Unbelievably, he must have left the window open and he could see that the winds which blew in turned the moisture in his breath instantly to clouds of frost. He lay on his back, drawing in the frigid air. His heart pounded in his chest, so painfully that Mike did not think it possible for any organ of mere flesh and blood to maintain that awful pace.

Eventually he sat up and looked around. The chair next to his bed was knocked over and in falling had tipped over the kerosene lamp, now steadily leaking its noxious contents. The curtains flapped, the fabric snapping furiously. As Mike watched, the patterns of night and darker shadow which rippled across the material took on the aspect of a face filled with furious anger, huge enough to fill the window. The edges of the drape curled and unrolled, to become lips pulled open in a scream. Deep pits of greater darkness were eyes, searching from one corner of the room to another, to eventually settle on Mike where he sat on the floor. The wind shrieked again, through a mouth which now split open from one side of the window to the other, then hands of insubstantial cloth, tipped with nails razor sharp, fell out from the curtains, grasping for him across the room. He pushed himself backwards, feet tangled for a moment in the bedclothes he had pulled to the floor, then scrambling again until he was backed against the wall.

In that movement, the angles of the moonlight shifted so that the curtains became things of mere fabric again and the roaring which had filled the space was only the wind. Rain become tiny flecks of ice, invisible in the night-dark, flew in through the window, stinging. Mike pressed a hand upon his chest to feel his heart beat, fluttering like the wings of an injured bird. Eventually he got up again, on legs that felt no more substantial than water and made his way to the window, trying to avoid the flesh-creeping touch of the curtains as they fluttered around him.

The window closed, he sat on the bed and shivered. He would never have believed that it was possible to be so cold. The spasms jerked his body like a puppet, and no matter how hard he hugged himself, nor how tightly he pulled the covers around his shoulders, the cold had settled intractably in his bones.

When, eventually, the shivering fit began to diminish, Mike was able to grope around for his clothes and begin to ease himself into his trousers and whatever else he could find. Little by little, the chill began to leach away, leaving behind a dull ache that radiated from his core. It hurt, and he remembered a snowy winter’s morning in his childhood, when his mother had warned against going out and snowballing without gloves. Inevitably, Mike had done just that, and the pain when he returned indoors to warm frozen fingers had been exquisite. Now, he felt that same torture in every part of his body. He had once been told that dying of exposure was almost restful, a torpor which eased into a quiet release. That belief had remained at the back of his mind, in the way that such half-truths often did, mercifully untested. He realised now that this nugget of folkloric knowledge was nothing short of being the world’s biggest fucking lie. To die of cold would be to die in agony.

Then he began to hear something beyond the blood rushing in his ears, something faint but insistent, repeating over and over. Someone calling his name, calling *for* him. Someone close by, and recognisable. Mike drew his knees up to his chest and sat, rocking gently back and forth, until, finally, there was nothing left to do but go next door to find out why Alex was calling his name in the middle of the night.

In the frail light before the dawn, he stepped with care out of his room and felt along the wall of the corridor. He stopped with his fingers resting upon the handle to Alex’s room.

The calling continued. “Mike…Mike…Mike….” Every few seconds, his name spoken again. Alex didn’t sound upset or frightened – just insistent, like a child calling out in the night confident that, sooner or later, a parent will come.

Mike opened the door. In Alex’s room, the window was also open, and in a repellent reminder of the hallucination he had suffered earlier, the curtains in Alex’s room also moved, drifting in the constant breeze like weed tumbled in ocean flows. Mike stepped across to close Alex’s window and pushed open the drapes as far as he could, letting in pale moonlight, waxing and waning as thick thunderheads of cloud passed by above.

“Mike.”

“Alex?”

“Would you look under my bed?”

It was a request so utterly unexpected that Mike had to make sure he had heard it right first time: “Say again?”

Mike nearly laughed, despite himself. It could almost be a parody of the nuclear family: kooky Mum (current whereabouts unknown, but presumed to be doing something characteristically kooky), son (child-like, not to mention child-ish) and Mike himself as the somewhat unlikely patriarch. Not such a great role, of course, given his unenviable record of care for children, but here he was and however ridiculous it seemed, Alex needed him. It couldn’t hurt, just to have a quick peek under Alex’s bed. It would be a simple act of reassurance.

“Would you look under my bed?” Alex whispered, more insistently now.

Suddenly Alex *did* sound scared. The figure on the bed remained still. Mike dropped down on one knee, pulled up the bedclothes, and, putting his lamp on the floor, leant down to look.

In the darkness, eyes wide and glistening wet with tears, Alex lay with one hand clamped fiercely over his own mouth. With the other hand Alex pointed frantically upwards towards whatever it was that lay above him.

*Chapter 39: Alex and Mike*

As a half-hearted dawn washed over the island, Mike opened his eyes and whispered a prayer to thank God for the daylight. Alex still slept, curled into a constricted ball on the sofa. They had both spent the rest of the night in the common room, with the wood burner well fuelled and all available lamps lit.

The night before Mike had taken hold of Alex from under the bed and dragged him away. Once back in the communal area, Alex kept his eyes fixed on the door to the corridor, babbling and crying. Mike cradled Alex’s head against his shoulder, comforting Alex or himself, Mike wasn’t quite sure. With the brightening of the day Alex’s ragged breathing had slowed, until he was asleep, enabling Mike to disentangle himself and lay Alex gently down. Mike would have liked to barricade the door to Alex’s room but couldn’t face going back into the corridor, not until it was fully daylight again. Had there been something in Alex’s bed and what had forced Alex to hide under it? Or had he only seen an innocent mound of pillows and bedclothes, which had taken on a human form in the darkness, stoked by their overwrought imaginations? *What the hell is happening in this fucking place*? Mike asked himself. Mike needed to know what Alex had seen but had to face the fact that he would have to wait.

Mike made coffee, then tried to rouse his companion but Alex slept on, until Mike began to suspect that this was beyond normal sleep – that Alex had been shocked into catatonia. Mike nursed his rapidly cooling drink and watched with a sort of detached resignation from the window as black clouds massed in the skies across the water. Now that he had no doubt that there was an inimical presence on the island, a massive storm would fit that narrative perfectly. It was always in tempest that the unpalatable universal truths of Gothic fictions were revealed. Mike was sure that he knew what stalked him. The realisation had come to him, fully formed, during the night, that evil spirits had followed him here through a door somehow opened by the island.

He tried to wake Alex again but without success, and that too seemed inevitable as if in the story of Mike’s life, Alex and Eleanor were only bit players. Now that they were no longer needed, they would be shuffled off stage. The final chapter would be Mike’s alone.

Eventually, Mike made up his mind that he would have to go to find Eleanor. Having decided that, he would leave a note in case Alex woke up. Mike had to search for something to write with and something to write on, and, with a sick certainty, he knew that the best place to find what he needed was in Alex’s room. He started down the corridor, then stopped to return to the kitchen. He slid open a drawer and selected the largest of the knives. He flashed a figure of eight in front of his chest then made a few stabbing feints at waist level. Having a weapon made him feel a little better.

Moving as stealthily as he was able, Mike crept back along the corridor, stopping when he was outside Alex’s door.

*This is crazy*. *Alex is a like a frightened kid and you’ve let his fear infect you as well. There is nothing on Alex’s bed except a heap of bedclothes, there was nobody in the room except Alex himself.* Yet a part of him whispered slyly: *If you believe that, why are you shaking, Mike? Why is your heart leaping? Why are you so fucking scared?*

Mike hefted the knife in his right hand, reassured by the weight and balance of the blade and reached for the door.

“What are you *doing*?” Alex hissed.

Mike span around, colliding into the jamb, the knife held out, quivering at the edge of Mike’s control.

“Alex!” he managed.

Alex looked down at the knife and backed away, one hesitant step after another.

“You’re awake,” Mike said.

“What are you doing?” Alex whispered. For the briefest moment, Mike wondered if he had ever seen anyone look quite so terrified. Then he remembered that of course he had, a small and desperate face bordered in flame.

“I was going back in. I was looking for some paper and a pen to leave you a note saying I was going out looking for Eleanor. Obviously no point now.”

“So leave it,” Alex said. He began to back further away.

“What got you so scared Alex? What did you see last night?”

“I got into bed and put out the light. Then…there was something at the door and…it came in, searching for something in the darkness. I wouldn’t have been able to get past it so I hid. Under the bed. But then it came and sat there, right above me. It smelt bad, Mike, like smoke from a bonfire of tyres.”

The gooseflesh was rippling all over his body but still Mike had to ask: “So that was when you started to call for me?”

“That wasn’t me. It sat on my bed but it called out for *you*, Mike.”

Just having Alex there gave Mike a boost of courage. “I think we have to look, Alex,” he said. “Unless you want to wait until tonight?” Mike added, only a little shocked to hear the meanness in his own voice. Alex looked as if he was about to cry.

Mike started forward to open the door.

“Wait,” Alex said. He dashed back into the kitchen, where Mike heard the knife drawer rattling again. Alex reappeared armed with a carving knife of his own.

Mike opened the door and stepped in.

The bedclothes were heaped up along the middle of the bed, but they could never, even in a fevered nightmare, have been mistaken for a body. Alex followed into the room and Mike was aware, from the corner of his vision, that Alex had scooped up his computer and was rapidly backing out of the room again. Mike followed, careful to ensure that the door was secured as he left.

Back in the living room, Alex had already flipped up the screen to the laptop and was busy tapping away on the keyboard. “Shit,” he spat.

“Alex,” Mike said. “We need to talk. We need to tell each other everything we can about what’s going on, about what happened last night…”

“Wait!” Alex interrupted.

“What’s up now?” Mike wanted to know. He felt his fists clenching, hard enough to make his tendons creak.

“It’s dead.” Alex showed Mike the computer’s black screen. “I need to power it up. Will you come back to my room with me?”

The solar charger, of course, was still in Alex’s room.

“I think it’s safe now. There was nothing there.” Mike spoke with what he hoped to be authority.

Alex looked doubtful but got up and made his way back towards his room one more time.

Mike tried hard to start thinking clearly. What should be their priorities? Finding Eleanor? Maybe not. Maybe it would be better to attract some help first. He could do that before the rain started by building a fire, perhaps, which was something that he and Alex could to do together. When help arrived, *then* they could organise a search for Eleanor before getting off this island and going back to some sort of civilization. Mike began to fantasise about a warm hotel room – get Haigh to pay for that, it was the least he could do after stranding them all here for months, Mike thought. And hadn’t Haigh withheld some pretty pertinent facts from them? Such as the place being haunted, for a start. Mike began to see more than just a comfortable hotel room: good food, comfortable clothes – some company, for God’s sake, just some other people, *normal* people, not having to look all day at Eleanor moping about, slowly regressing to a state of nature, like the bloody island itself; Alex in a slow motion mental collapse…He stopped himself. Where *was* Alex? Picking up the charger should only have taken a couple of seconds yet he had been gone…How long, exactly? Mike had been daydreaming again. These fugues came upon him at the very times when he should be at his most alert.

“Alex? Alex!” Mike ran to the room, not knowing what he expected to find.

Alex stood at the doorway to his quarters, stock-still and staring.

Mike grabbed his companion’s arm. “Are you OK? What’s wrong?”

Alex turned slowly but did not reply. The solar charger dangled from one hand, then slipped out of his fingers on to the floor. Mike led Alex back to the sofa. It seemed that the tattered old couch had become the pivotal point of their steadily contracting world. He positioned Alex on the edge of the seat, where he remained bolt upright and motionless.

*Chapter 40: Mike*

Once again Mike found himself outside. He had left Alex staring into the far distance and so still that his trembling breath was the only discernible movement. Mike had bundled as much firewood as he dared into the burner and the fire already glowed. He decided that he would check out the boat again, this time with a clearer head. It was possible that things weren’t as bad as he had first thought. They might even be able to salvage the boat, make it seaworthy enough for at least one final crossing to the mainland. If it was beyond saving – and he was fairly confident in his secret heart that it was – he had plans for it nonetheless. He set off towards the pebble beach, leaning into the savage gusts that roiled off the sea. The storm, (*maybe the final storm* he thought) was approaching, and quickly. Something that had its origins on the island was surely at work, creating sideshows to distract him whenever some essential piece of information drifted too close. *But delaying for what purpose?* he wondered.

The boat, as he had thought before, was totally wrecked. Ignoring the cold, painful at first but quickly generously numbing, Mike waded in at the boat’s stern and started to pull apart the shattered remains. Much of the woodwork was still attached to other broken parts but most of the boards came away easily enough and these he heaved up onto the dockside. Then he was pulling at loose panels with all his might, kicking out at those which did not yield at first. He seemed to have been working for a long time, his fingers bleeding from dozens of splinters and cuts from innumerable twists of metal, but even so, his pile of wood looked pathetically small by the time he decided that there was no more to be torn from the wreck. He bundled his haul onto one large tarpaulin, recovered from one of the boat’s lockers, and made his way back dragging it all along behind him. A few smaller remains of the smashed boat were caught in the wind to be set cartwheeling across the boggy ground. Mike dumped his haul on the area he had selected for his bonfire, a sheltered piece of scrubland to the side of the chalet.

He marched back to the store and picked up two kegs of kerosene. He had intended to take two full kegs, but they all seemed half-empty, at best. The workroom reeked of the stuff, a miasma which sucked the moisture out of him. Mike put all disturbing thoughts about the missing kerosene out of his mind. “Later,” he promised himself.

He stumbled to his stack of kindling and set the barrels down. He opened up the taps to let the kerosene flow over the wood, otherwise too wet to burn. Even with the pile soaked in accelerant, there would have to be some dry wood as well if the fire was to have any chance of getting started.

Back in the workshop he unclipped an axe from its place on a wall-bracket. He weighed it in his hands, nodded in satisfaction. Mouth set in determination, he returned to the front of the building. In the space of the next hour or so, Mike set up a destructive production line, dragging furniture past the still unresponsive Alex, to break into pieces outside. When he was satisfied with his work, he transported the wood around the corner and added it to the pile: wet wood for smoke; dry wood for fuel; kerosene to get the party started. Mike grinned as he worked, happy to be proactive, not just some sop whose role was to run cravenly from one scare to the next. Despite the weather, Mike sweated with exertion until finally he had a created a reasonably sized pyre. He allowed himself the barest moment to stand back and admire his handiwork before going in search of a way to set it all alight.

Indoors, he found a gas-lighter in the kitchen drawers. He fetched it out and jammed the nozzle into the mass of combustibles but the gale whipped the flame away as soon as the trigger was pressed.

Mike unzipped his outer jacket and yanked it off. Then he lay down with it over both his head and the firelighter. In the makeshift windbreak he managed to get the lighter to spark and touched the flame to a pool of kerosene by his face. It ignited with a sound like the exhalation of a huge and hungry animal, an instant fire which flashed over Mike’s face in a single scorching arc. He rolled away, one arm of his coat coming free and flopping unseen into the little lake of fire he had recently kindled.

Mike beat at his face with his free hand, unaware for the moment that his jacket was smouldering. A gust of wind tore across from the sea casting a bright mountain of sparks from the bonfire into the sky. His beacon was catching very well indeed. He lay still, experimentally opening and closing his mouth to feel the stretch of his burnt skin. Then he became aware of a second source of warmth and looked across to see that his jacket was beginning to burn. He gathered it to him, intending to smother the flames, but a corner became hooked on a splinter from the boat’s woodwork, and when another gust blew, the jacket, still alight, was ripped out of Mike’s hand to glide away, a phoenix scattering its own ashes.

Mike sat up and an absurd thought formed: *This is not going well*. Laughing hurt his cracking lips, but he couldn’t help it – this really was something of a black comedy.

He struggled to his feet. Whatever else had happened, his fire even at this early stage, was burning fiercely. He thought of a few more good ingredients to add: the wellington boots should burn nicely, he thought. Hell, even the radio – all those hi-tech innards would belch out plenty of black, oily smoke. Holding tight to burnt flesh, he shuffled back to the workroom to see what else he could find.

*Chapter 41: Alex*

Inside the chalet, Alex blinked and looked around. He had been lost in a place where the swirling, nebulous mists of numbers made no sense, a world where two plus two no longer summed to four – in fact equalled everything *except* four. Gradually though, he had managed to struggle his way back to the waking world. He had seen something, when he had gone back into his room to find the solar charger. He didn’t remember what it was – he didn’t *want* to remember – but there had been *something*. Dig too deep and he might find himself cut loose from reality again, and next time he might not find his way home so quickly. Or at all. So Alex carefully put all those thoughts aside in order to turn his focus on the frenetic activity which now seemed to be happening all around him. Mike had been rushing in and out, dragging chairs and benches with him. From the sounds which reached Alex from outside, it would appear that Mike was breaking up the furniture. Alex guessed that he was making a fire to alert people to their distress – a rescue beacon.

Alex watched as Mike hurried backwards and forwards. He understood what Mike wanted to do, but didn’t feel inclined to help. Alex didn’t actually think it was such a great idea. No-one on the mainland would necessarily view the fire as being anything out of the ordinary. It would be more likely to attract attention if there was *nothing* happening on the island. But Alex, attuned for once to the emotions of a fellow islander, thought it better to keep his own counsel. Finally, Mike had been gone for a longer while and then there was an acrid smell, wafting indoors despite closed doors and sealed windows. Alex spotted billows of charcoal-grey smoke caught in eddies which swirled visibly around the chalet as the fire outside got going.

Mike came back and grabbed an armful of wet weather gear and some boots.

“They’ll burn well,” Alex said, to himself as much as to Mike, who glanced over at him with an expression which anyone would find hard to read. For Alex it was utterly inscrutable. He suddenly thought that he had better reserve himself some of the gear that Mike seemed so intent on burning. It looked quite possible that the entire contents of the chalet would soon be going up in flames. Alex got up and selected his favourite items of clothing, then bundled them up and hid them down the side of the sofa, just in case Mike could not be persuaded to spare them when the time came.

*Chapter 42: Eleanor*

Eleanor had not intended to go to the cave but, if she had thought about it at all, it was the obvious choice. So obvious, in fact, that if Mike had set off in search he might well get there before she did. She was moving with great care, after all, and he tended to move more quickly, more *purposefully*. More *gung-ho*, she might have said. Eleanor thought that another storm was likely and the cave was the only place of real shelter outside of the building. So, again a natural choice. She would be dry there and able to find a place to sleep. It was big enough, she felt sure. If Mike came after her, she was reasonably confident that she could evade him and find a way back again in her own time.

She picked her way gingerly over the rocks, aware that to slip risked a broken ankle, or worse. In any case there was no hurry. Even if Mike caught up with her, Eleanor doubted that he would try to strong-arm her to return with him. She had come to believe that Mike was a bully at heart, but the sanctimonious sort who didn’t want people to *think* he was a bully, so dragging her kicking and screaming back to base wouldn’t be his style.

She had been walking along, mostly watching where she was stepping, when she looked up to see the mouth of the cave. Only then, confronted with the reality of it, did she wonder if this was such a good idea. In her imagination the cave had been like something out of a Ladybird book – a neat space, almost antiseptic. In reality, the opening gaped like a hungry mouth, flecked with rot. She debated what to do but was decided by the first spots of rain on the imminent storm. As Eleanor entered she wondered if anything lived there. Not bears or anything like that, obviously. But bats were a possibility, she imagined. She wondered if bats lived by the sea or if she had she ever heard sea-bats mentioned on the nature documentaries she had once watched on lonely nights waiting for her mother’s call from the sick-room. Those shows made the natural world look so clean and safe, so friendly. Reality wasn’t like that at all. Like the cave itself, most of the natural world stank and there was precious little kindness to be found.

She shouted into the darkness because she didn’t want to catch any cave animals by surprise. “Hello. Hello, is there anybody there?” *Maybe you weren’t thinking of only* animals *in the cave,* Eleanor chided herself. No bats came swarming out, nobody answered. She ventured in a little further but realised that her earlier plans had been a little naïve. There was scant chance of being able to hide away in this labyrinth – it was utterly lightless and it was already obvious that the sandy carpet she had imagined as a level floor was in fact a treacherous mess of jagged rocks and slippery boulders. Falling here would be infinitely more dangerous than falling outside. So she lay down on the first reasonably level area she found.

Outside, framed by the cave’s entrance, the moon’s reflection carved a silvery path across the restless sea, although the quality of the light was filmy and diffuse, like a sepia-tinted memory.

Eleanor sat up. Against the mouth of the cave she saw a figure silhouetted, motionless but caught in the middle of movement, with arms and legs extended, a shadow in mid-leap.

Mike or Alex must have found her and she was suddenly too tired to keep hiding. “Who’s there?” she called.

The shadow didn’t seem to hear her. Any movement shivered on the very edge of visibility.

Eleanor slid off her rock, easing herself down gently onto footholds below. One foot slipped on a smooth pebble, then she righted herself. In the split-second she had taken her eye off the visitant, it had moved again. Although closer now, there were still no recognisable features. It wasn’t that big – Eleanor decided that meant it must be Alex, and another idea occurred to her.

“Alex, have you run away as well? Alex, is that you?”

The moonlight was obscured by a passing cloud and when the darkness passed the figure had advanced again.

Eleanor felt the first tentative prickle of alarm: not only was it too small to be Mike, it was surely too small to be Alex. This was, certainly but impossibly, a child. For the moment it was still again, a figure of jet-black onyx cut out of the seascape beyond. As the shadow lurched to one side, torso twisted, Eleanor took a step back and stumbled. This time, she tried to keep her eyes on it as it advanced. She didn’t want it inching any closer when she wasn’t looking. She nearly succeeded in staying upright but just as she had thought that she was stable, her legs slid away again beneath her and she sat down heavily.

Eleanor gasped for breath and blinked away tears. The thing had crept nearer again in the brief moments she had looked away. What sort of dark angel was it that only moved when it was not watched? Eleanor knew the answer, of course. This was one of the entities which Alex’s program could see where human eyes were blind. Whatever this was, wherever it had come from, she knew with an ancient instinct that it was something summoned and lent its awful solidity by the island.

She squeezed herself back into a narrow cleft behind her. Trying to keep one eye on what stalked her, she began to push herself backwards. If there was a path into the interior of the cave, she might be lucky enough to find it. Nothing, nothing would persuade her to take her courage in her hands and confront what was in front of her. Every impulse in her was shrieking: to run, to get as far away as possible. She continued to push backwards, ever-deeper, silently begging the moon not to dim again and allow whatever tracked her a chance to continue its advance. Then she found that she was backed into a rough corner of rock. Her outstretched fingers dug at the cold rock until it was clear to her, with a burgeoning dread that threatened to overwhelm her completely, that the only thing she could do was to step forward and try to find another route. That would take more courage than she possessed so she sat to await whatever would come.

The presence that hunted Eleanor sank down beside her, its suppurating body trembling with barely supressed anticipation.

*Chapter 43: Alex*

Alex waited for Mike to return but when he didn’t come back Alex decided to put on all the clothing he had rescued from Mike’s earlier rampage and go out himself. He could feel a monster storm building in the air around him. Stepping outdoors was to abandon any last illusion of security; with winds that crossed the Atlantic unimpeded bearing down with elemental fury on the land, the first they had encountered in a thousand miles. Rain was driving into the earth, throwing up mud in spumes abruptly yanked into mist. With the hair all over his body prickling in primordial reflex, Alex felt the temperature falling as he stood.

He made his way around to where Mike had started the fire. It was burning well, despite the storm. Or maybe because of it, as each new gust of wind caused the flames to leap up again as if driven by giant bellows. Flecks of burning wood span out of the flames, disappearing into the sky like angry comets. Mike was sitting on the ground, one hand holding the charred remains of his jacket, the other pressed to his face. Alex went to sit next to him, leaning over with his mouth nearly against Mike’s ear in order to be heard against the rising storm.

“Are you OK?” Alex yelled.

Mike took his hand away from his face. Skeins of flesh peeled off in loose flaps. “Not really,” Mike said.

“Do you need to come in?”

Mike considered for a while, rolling the ruined jacket slowly around in his free hand. “Probably should. But I’ll stay out here anyway. See what happens.”

“Have you been burnt?” Alex asked. It was a superfluous question.

“I tried to light a fire with me still in it. Not such a great idea.” Mike attempted a smile but it ended as a rictus grin that threatened to tear apart his face.

Mike’s injuries looked painful, but Alex was unsure what first aid should be applied to burns. Access to the internet would have been useful he thought, by no means for the first time. He wondered if putting some water on the burns might be a good idea and decided to ask Mike.

“Yeah, probably a good idea. But don’t worry about it, I’ll sit it out. Or maybe we should go and look for Eleanor now. What do you think?” Through Mike’s burnt lips, the words came out sounding mashed: *Whayathin?*

“Maybe that’san idea we should act on,” Alex said slowly.

“Was that a joke, Alex?”

Alex smiled, a quick flash of teeth. “I’ll go and get some torches.” He tried not to think too much about what they might need but the visions of Eleanor broken at the bottom of the cliffs persisted.

Mike nodded. It felt good to have someone else take responsibility, even for a moment. As Alex darted back towards the cabin, so Mike tried to find a way to ease the formicating pain. Each breath stretched cracking lips, with cheeks strained between tents of bone, his skin feeling ready to rip at the slightest aggravation. He closed his eyes. Just beyond him, the fire roared again, and in the heart of the flames, unseen and unremembered, one of the kegs of kerosene, the metal not yet quite red hot, began to buckle, then bulge.

In the chalet Alex tried to collect together anything which he felt might be remotely useful but in the end only kept the torches and a few spare batteries. Then there was a thunder as if giants were hammering on the roof, so loud that Alex shrank back. Here was the storm, arrived at last.

Outside, a sheet of corrugated metal twisted by, carried on howling winds, spinning from the beach towards the top of the island, funnelled through the narrow walkway at the side of the building. It would be airborne for a turn, then drop, a rough edge tearing a furrow in the sodden earth, before being picked up again and hurled on anew. At the growing fire the rain and the flames battled, but Mike was nowhere to be seen.

“Mike?” Alex shouted, although the gale ripped away his voice.

In the corner of his eye, Alex saw a form flitting across the dancing shadows cast by the fire, disintegrating as it moved.

Alex caught up with Mike and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Mike, let’s find Eleanor.”

Alex looked at him, bringing to mind a memory, razor-sharp, of Mike as he had been: and, yes there had been something tired and melancholy, even from their first meeting, but not like *this*. He was unshaven to the point of vagrancy, eyes rimmed with tight, purple skin gleaming in the firelight. The burns were angry red and a patch of roasted skin had already split open, seeping a widening straw-coloured discharge.

“Eleanor?” Mike said.

“I think we need to find her before this gets any worse,” Alex waved an arm about to encompass the weather, the fire – everything. He would feel better when they found Eleanor – she was his friend, and apart from that, he was becoming increasingly worried about *Mike*. Eleanor seemed to know what to do when dealing with people. For Alex, that was always going to be, at best, unclear. Just at the moment it was impenetrable.

“Alex, we need to talk,” Mike yelled.

“What about Eleanor?” Alex asked again. Mike gestured to Alex to follow him to the workroom.

Mike clung onto the younger man as if afraid that the wind might catch him up as it had the debris that now flew around them. They crept back along the path, huddled together by instinct, and fell into the workroom from where Mike could keep an eye on his fire, the flames now pulsing into the sky between squalls of rain.

“I have something to tell you and I think it has an impact on us here. God knows how, but I believe it does.”

Mike momentarily pressed his cheek to the window, soothing the burnt skin. A small patch remained stuck to the glass when he pulled away. Alex lowered his hood.

“Have you stopped to wonder what all this is about?” Mike asked. Silhouetted against the bonfire which billowed outside the window, Mike looked like a fifth-rate prophet, elemental and crazed.

Alex couldn’t think of a satisfactory answer. “All of what?”

“The island. Us coming together. Everything. All this mayhem.”

“Tell me what you think,” Alex said.

Mike shifted to lean against the workbench. As Mike moved, Alex became aware of the reek of kerosene. It seemed that the room was soaked in the stuff. “I haven’t been…completely open with you and Eleanor. About my past.”

Alex nodded, then realised that Mike possibly couldn’t see that gesture, given that the only light in the room was a roseate glow coming from the fires burning outside. “I see,” he said eventually.

“I was a successful man, doing well for myself. Nice house, good…well, everything was good, going according to plan. Better than planned, in fact. But it all changed, one day, just like that and all at once. I killed somebody.”

Alex wondered if had heard correctly. There had been so many instances in the past weeks when it seemed as if some unseen force was out to trick him, make him believe the unbelievable. Mike had talked about Alex hiding under the bed. The radio had been broken but then Eleanor proclaimed that it had been working all along. There was too much that was unsure, too much that was ambiguous. The colours in Alex’s head hardly flowed at all now, having become stagnant, almost befouled.

“Did you say you killed someone?”

“Worse than that, Alex. It wasn’t just – *someone*. I killed a child, a little boy.”

Alex had the vertiginous sense of crossing a chasm on a slender tightrope, which represented his sanity, normality, but that rope was exceeding thin and he swayed precariously. The gulf above which he walked – that was the abnegation of logic and to fall would be an extinction worse than death. Alex eyed his surroundings and tried to calculate his chances if he was forced to make a run for it.

Mike saw what Alex was thinking. He moved away deliberately, trying to show that he wasn’t aiming to block a possible escape route. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I hadn’t meant to kill anyone. I’m not a murderer.”

Alex worked to regulate his breathing, fighting a growing alarm. “What happened?”

“I was driving home after work. I’d stopped off, but I didn’t have anything to drink.” Mike looked out of the window, struggling to control the tremors in his voice, fighting back tears. “I’d been tooling along the road, then into town, looking forward to getting home, all the normal things. I was trying to get something I wanted on the radio but I had buggered up the pre-set buttons somehow, so I was scrolling through the stations, trying to find something I wanted.”

Alex imagined the scene: Mike in his car – a *nice* car, Alex was sure – his attention increasingly off the road. Perhaps straying a little bit over the white dividing line, no music, only the chaos of multiple stations and the static between, all the while rushing closer towards a defining and monstrous moment, the event which would be the fulcrum on which his life would turn.

“My attention was on the radio, I was looking at that instead of the road, so I didn’t see the other car. I didn’t see anything until I hit them, head on, a mother driving her son. I saw the woman hit the windscreen. It smashed into fragments, you know how it does, like little cubes. But there was blood in some of the cracks. Really strange how your mind works in those circumstances because there was an image I couldn’t get out of my head. Not a starburst of blood, or anything that came later but the windscreen broken like a fucking crossword, squares in deep crimson.”

“So, they were dead? The boy and his mother?”

Mike looked down at his hands, now locked fiercely together.

“Not right away. They got the mother out of the car, but the boy…no-one could get close... the car caught fire… he lived for a few days, Alex.”

Mike stopped for a while, swallowing furiously. Alex watched, unable to think of a single thing to say that sounded right. Finally Mike continued: “The car caught fire but at first no-one noticed that there was a child in the back seat – not until it was too late. The door wouldn’t open, you see, because I had put such a dent in it. I kept thinking: *It may not be that bad*. Maybe he’s going to be OK. I kept expecting that someone would turn up and sort out this god-awful mess, that everything would work out alright…but the car burnt and the boy burnt in it. I watched him burn and the boy saw me watching. He got taken to hospital and lasted a whole week. A month or so down the line, the mother decided that it wasn’t worth carrying on and killed herself. Tablets for her; she wanted an easier way to go than her son, I suppose.”

“What happened to you?” Alex asked. All around them, the building was groaning with the violent movements and up draughts in the air, an almost-living creature.

“Court case, dangerous driving. No-one wants to hear it wasn’t your fault when there’s a dead child involved. Prison. Lost my job, my house, my friends. In the end, everyone important to me was gone. I had a rough time in prison – the hard men there don’t look much beyond a label like *child-killer*.” He flashed Alex a thin and humourless grin twisted askew by his burnt flesh.

“But what’s that got to do with us, Mike?”

“It’s the image your computer sees. It’s what it recognises. It’s the same boy.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Alex struggled to enumerate all the ways in which this had to be the purest bullshit. “If you’re saying that there is a ghost, why here? Don’t ghosts haunt the places where they died? What would it be doing here?”

“I’ve got a theory about that.”

“Go on” Alex said.

Outside, the fire roared again and sparks danced, one or two making it over the path to die battering against the workshop window. If Eleanor was indeed out in the storm – and where else could she be? – Alex hoped that she had found proper shelter. That caused another thought to begin forming, but before it could properly take shape, Mike continued.

“For various reasons, in different ways, we found ourselves here on the island. What would you say is the defining feature of the place?”

He shrugged, although the answer was obvious enough. “Isolation?”

Mike pointed a forefinger at Alex’s head and make an action like the firing of a gun. “Exactly. What better place to do some haunting, miles from anywhere, no possibility of being interrupted in your work?”

“You think the child you…the child who died, you think he’s haunting you?”

“I do, yes.”

“So why am I involved; what’s it got to do with me? Or with Eleanor?”

Mike looked at his companion thoughtfully. “Here, the reality is….I don’t know how to describe it…*Thinner*. Maybe that’s the best word for it. Everything feels brittle here, like one picture painted on top of another, the layers slowly peeling away.”

The image appealed to Alex, the idea taking on a light and comforting glow.

“And we came along with all our worries, our histories…our little *secrets*. Then somehow it uses our weaknesses...our past…”

“And what about me, Mike? What’s *my* weak spot?”

“You?” Mike said, almost incredulously. “Isn’t it obvious? Your weak spot is your program. Everything you have worked towards for all these years. Destroy your faith in that and it has taken a large part of you.”

Alex wanted to come back at Mike with something balanced and sensible, an argument that would demolish his crazy narrative, because Alex hadn’t done anything wrong, hadn’t killed anyone. But even as he struggled to formulate the words, the door blew open, and a blizzard of glowing embers swarmed in. Alex shielded his eyes but heard Mike shout, and then, with an almost silent growl, a pale blue flame sprang up from the floor of the workroom.

*Chapter 44: Mike*

The fire raced across the floor, curling greedily into the spaces between the boards. As he stamped around without effect in his imagination Mike saw pools – no, veritable *lakes* – of kerosene, oil and petrol beneath him, all igniting one after the other. He grabbed a handful of Alex’s sleeve to haul the younger man outside.

“Need to get an extinguisher,” Mike bellowed. Alex nodded and they both looked back to see that the main accommodation was untouched by flame, although as they watched slick smoke began to unfold across the roof.

Together they went back in through the main front door. By the kitchen were two fire extinguishers and they grabbed one each, surprisingly heavy. By the time they got back to the workroom only a few seconds had passed but the fire had already taken a firm hold. Mike ran into the door with his shoulder, hard enough to take it off its hinges and leave it hung aslant across the doorway. Mike stepped back and delivered two more heavy kicks to rip it completely free.

He yanked the pin from the trigger mechanism of the extinguisher, then pointed the jet of water towards the floor. Oily gobbets of fire rained down, spitting venomously and bouncing across the tools. Alex dragged Mike back out of the doorway.

“Let me try,” said Alex.

At first, Mike made no sense of what he was seeing – there seemed to be a covering of snow falling in front of them, surely an impossibility, although no sooner did it settle than it melted into mist. Another time, and another fire, began to fuse with the present so that for a heartbeat or two, the disorientation was total before Mike understood that Alex had used the carbon dioxide extinguisher. Mike had used a water extinguisher and the powerful jet had succeeded only in scattering the burning fuels into the air. Alex was using the right equipment but as fast as he put out one part of the fire, another mushroomed in its place. As Mike watched, a curtain of flame swept up the wall. The very timbers of the room were soaked in flammable liquids. Even through thick boots he could feel heat beneath his feet. This was going to be a battle lost almost before it was begun. The house – the house they had contracted to protect through the winter – was going to burn. Together, the two men backed out of the room, onto the muddy track that would take them up to the island’s high places.

“The island,” Alex whispered, barely audible. “It wants us dead.”

“I don’t think this is poisoned water Alex, I really don’t.”

Alex, for all his prized rationality, didn’t think so either. Poisoned water?! Might as well blame all of this on the miasma, the luminiferous aether, the malefic influence of a waxing moon. Whatever was happening, it felt personal.

In the pyre that still raged at their backs the metal barrel which had been filled with kerosene groaned, then within a split second a microscopic fault-line ruptured, initiating catastrophic failure. A smooth circle raced around the circumference of the cylinder, reliving the pressure within, tearing chunks out of the side of the keg and flinging them out, each one a warhead of super-heated metal.

One such missile took Alex just beneath his breastbone, tearing his heart into jagged halves, the wound cauterising as the metal ripped through the flesh. Meeting Alex’s backbone, the shard slid upwards, carving to the spinal cord before severing the major arteries of his neck. Mike had heard the explosion but by the time he could turn his head Alex was already fatally wounded. Blood pumped from the entry and exit wounds but Alex still stood, as if not yet sure that he was dead, before collapsing on to his knees, then falling face forward onto the ground.

“Alex!” Mike screamed. He dropped down beside the corpse. Where the metal protruded through Alex’s neck, it had the absurd look of a Tudor ruff. Mike turned the body over. Alex’s eyes were open, so that the fires which now burned on two sides of them were reflected in sightless pupils. Another explosion rocked the bonfire, another cloud of debris launched into the scattering wind. Mike wondered at the gaping wounds on Alex’s body, thinking that they should be gushing thick gouts of gore. He didn’t know that Alex’s heart had been pulped – there was nothing left to pump the blood. The stink of burning and of dead things was very great.

Mike took hold of Alex’s legs and started to drag the body away, out of the reach of the twin fires which now seemed to grope eagerly towards each other. Alex’s head rolled loosely on his shoulders. His dead eyes stared up at an angle impossible in life. It was one horror too many for Mike. Some deep mental circuit breaker snapped closed and he dropped Alex’s legs and started to run. If Alex’s body burned that would not be so very bad Mike decided and he didn’t think he could take much more without some important part of him metaphorically burning out as well, beyond the possibility of repair. Mike got to the front of the lodge where the wind blew unimpeded, and it was as cold as death. He walked one way, then the other, willing himself to think clearly. The distress beacon was going to be bigger than he had ever anticipated, so surely help would be on its way soon. So he tried to think what he could do now, *right now*, to maximise his chances of survival.

He started to laugh. To cause the death of one innocent person was a tragedy. To be responsible for two was beginning to look careless. Something smashed behind him – a window breaking, maybe, or some piece of large equipment tumbling in the stores. It sobered him, a little. He suddenly realised that there was still one thing he could do for Alex.

He jumped up onto the veranda and from there back into the main room. The wood-burner was still alight, but small fry compared to its bigger and much more voracious counterparts outside. Mike looked around desperately. Alex’s computer was the only part of his companion he could save now and the only thing which could be a fitting memorial. To let that burn as well would be almost as big a betrayal as standing Alex next to a fire full of kerosene drums. What had Mike been thinking? The answer, perhaps, was that whatever thoughts there had been weren’t entirely his anyway. Flames began to pour wildly through the wall separating the living quarters from the stores.

Finally, just as he believed that the rising heat would drive him out, Mike saw Alex’s machine and leapt at it. In a film, a burning timber would fall across his path but nothing stopped him getting outside again, leaving the building for what would be his final time.

Mike sat on the beach to watch the flames destroy the building. Mike was sure that the fire would be visible for miles, despite the worsening weather. It was difficult to believe that no-one had noticed this accidental beacon. But still no-one came.

Eventually, he flipped open the laptop and it whirred into life. Alex’s program flickered on, and that was strange in itself because Mike knew that Alex would have kept his pride and joy protected with a phalanx of passwords. The voice of the program began to speak, and although purportedly emotionless, didn’t it now contain just the barest hint of glee? He was aware of a vibration beneath his fingertips, becoming a rattle that shook the laptop in his grip.

**He sees you.**

Then louder:

**He sees you.**

**He is here.**

Then, even louder still, loud even set against the fury of the storm:

**I see you. I see you.**

With hands that trembled so badly that Mike was scared he might lose control of them altogether, he slammed the laptop closed. Alex’s program spoke with the voice of the island now. Maybe it always had.

Alex was beyond help but his strange and wonderful program might live on after him, if Mike looked after the machine. It might get back to normal when – if – they ever got rescued. Mike could imagine himself keeping the machine as his own and testing it out day by day. If it worked properly – if it didn’t find ghosts – then he could turn it over to Alex’s professors. On the other hand, if it was – perhaps *infected* was the best word he could come up with – then he would take a hammer to the machine batter it into dust. Either way, it would be honouring Alex’s memory. Right now, though, Mike had another task. Alex was dead, but the program might be saved, help should be on the way. So he ought to find Eleanor. If he could bring her back safely, that at least could be a redemption of sorts. He picked himself up, then started back along the beach. He knew whereEleanor would find shelter.

*Chapter 45: Eleanor*

Eleanor watched the features on the face beside her ripple and flow, almost impossible to watch as they flickered into temporary existence before retreating again into a darkened mask. Beneath her was sharp rock, biting through all her layers of clothing. Her fear had lasted so long, she was exhausted by it, almost to the point where she wanted the dread to be ended, however that resolution might come. Whatever will be, will be, she thought; and even in her extremity of terror, she found the strength to smile. What lay at her side mirrored her with a grin that slowly spread until it stretched impossibly wide.

Eleanor felt that these might be her last minutes but that realisation came with a calm of quiet clarity. She felt that she had at last found a position from which she could examine her life in totality, as if looking in from the outside. When she had been a girl – in an almost mythical past – she had been defined by others, dimly aware of and repulsed by their distaste for her, always trying – and failing – to stay abreast of trends that she barely recognised, let alone understood. Then she had come to the island and had imagined that everything had changed. She had surrendered a part of herself and it had felt good. No more struggling to be a part of a society which worked so hard to reject her. She had always imagined that she would have made a good mother, but she had been wrong, she could see now, utterly wrong. Coddling the people on life’s periphery – people like Alex – was only a pale reflection of the responsibilities of parenthood. Eleanor, for all the air of self-sacrifice she wanted to project, had always really put Eleanor first, hadn’t she? Now in the revelation of a stark magic at the hidden heart of the world, the island itself stalked her.

“What do you want from me?” she murmured although she already knew what it desired. It wanted all of her, every bit and morsel, nothing less.

A shadow against the shadows, it did not respond, not even to move, but Eleanor nonetheless felt that it *connected* with her in some barely knowable fashion. It didn’t seem any less inimical, but it did seem…well, what would be the word? *Interested*, perhaps.

“What more do you want?” She tried again.

For the first time, she was able to watch the blackness as it moved. Throbbing like a dark and poisonous liquid, it pushed itself even closer to Eleanor, so that she could smell its breath as it exhaled, a stink that was equal parts rot, smoke, and behind even that, blood. Eleanor briefly wondered whose blood this could be, so fresh, so vital.

Eleanor saw her early life, faded and anachronistic as old news-reel, the nostalgia of a bygone time. Slights and small cruelties, at first from her own mother and then from others in a seemingly unending procession. Only these were no baseless insults; she could understand now that those comments were well-deserved observations. Rejections which she would once have thought of as being casually cruel, now, in an emotionless orgy of self-acknowledgement, she saw as being perfectly *fitting*. How selfish she must have been! She had forced everyone who had ever known her to tell such lies, because had they told the truth about her they would have shrivelled with the embarrassment of it. She should never have imposed herself upon them, should never have tried to worm her way into their lives. She should have done the decent thing and stepped away. She should have done the decent thing and…

*Kill yourself.*

She considered for a minute or two, initially shocked at the ferocity of the thought, at its simultaneous promises of finality and of rightness. It was what she should have done a long time ago. Her whole existence had been a mistake, a mistake she had been too stupid to see, too spineless to make good. But now she knew what she had to do.

With that decision came a feeling of relief so deep, so immense, it made her vision cloud and her head swim. How typical it would be, she remonstrated sternly with herself, to have finally found the one useful thing she could do in all her pointless life, only to faint away like the spiritless sop that she was.

The child grinned. At last she saw his eyes, full of glee. She saw his mouth, twisted into a leering smile. She saw his misshapen, broken head. The features should have been wreathed in darkness, but instead shifted and shimmered as if lit from within, so that at one moment the child’s face was guileless and unblemished and the next it melted away leaving only furious eyes. With no little sense of wonder, she told herself that this was the boy in the cave. Before she ended herself, there was one more thing he wanted from her.

“Yes,” she said, delighted.

*Chapter 46: Mike*

Mike had tried to put his thoughts in order but instead found himself drifting and it was so very pleasant. It meant forgetting the sight of Alex torn by whatever had exploded out of the fire. It meant that he could overlook the inconvenient truth that he had placed kegs of kerosene in the fire and that, therefore, he was responsible for killing Alex, but he could forget that too if he could just allow his day-dreams the space they needed to grow. He could forget about Eleanor, still out there somewhere, quite possibly dying from exposure by this time. He thought she might have headed for the caves; that would have been an obvious place. On the other hand, maybe she was lying somewhere else sodden with rain and freezing to death. Mike could forget all of these things if he chose to do so, close his eyes and let the whole sordid reality wither.

Better yet, he could choose to forget about the boy he had killed. With stark and unlovely wonder, it occurred to him that he was now responsible for two deaths, a proper killer. He could let the images of burning flesh fade away and disappear, put aside a guilt that held him fast like an anchor and simply drift, drift. Perhaps in the dream-world, where anything is possible, all that he had done could be reversed and that awful all-pervasive guilt would be gone. Mike imagined a film running backwards: flames in retreat, agonies undoing, blood flowing into a body which began to mend itself, broken bones reknitting, then wrecked cars remaking themselves, before he was speeding backwards down the road, every moment unspooling more space between himself and his destiny. Inside the car, Mike finally looked up from the radio and still the car flew backwards. Eventually, he would reach the bar, and then he would never have all those drinks which he had always denied having, his lies becoming the truth. After that, he didn’t much care if his life-story carried on rewinding right back to extinction.

Then he was returned to the island and he had to face what was happening now, because whatever had happened in the past, Eleanor’s life might still depend upon his actions. That meant he still had a chance to put one thing right. He was soaked with rain which drenched him in ice-cold gusts; his face crawled with pain from the burns which now split his skin in red-raw canyons; his mind reeled. The building was now completely alight – a huge fire that had to be visible from the mainland. Inside, things broke and splintered in the heat, the timbers which held the roof groaning in their death-throes. The conflagration was everywhere, despite the rain. Flying embers had set other areas alight and these hungry if short-lived satellites had spawned other, younger bonfires of their own, all whipped by winds that were becoming strong enough to throw Mike to the ground.

He set off on the path which would lead around to the cave and tried to keep his focus on the task in hand. Just as Eleanor had done earlier, Mike had to pick his path carefully. It wasn’t that he cared if he fell and broke an ankle. Not for himself, at any rate. But to do so would put an end to his search for Eleanor and he wanted, *needed*, to do right by her.

He called out as he picked his way over the rocks. A mist of seawater snatched from the boiling peaks of waves saturated the air, salt stinging his eyes and face, making each breath feel a little bit like drowning.

“Eleanor!” He shouted as he walked.

What were the odds of finding her if she was curled up somewhere on the seashore? He would virtually need to step over her before he would be able to see her and even that limited visibility was worsening with every passing minute. And if she had actually decided to go elsewhere – *she liked the view from the top of the island, hadn’t she said?* – then his chances of finding her were zero. But his gamble was made.

He hadn’t even meant to have a drink that night. He had refused at first, wanting to get home. But his arm had been twisted, he had agreed to ‘a quick one’, one that had turned into several. He had always been capable of holding his drink, knew that he would be fine, he always had been. So he had been sure that having a couple of drinks couldn’t hurt. Of course, the drinks had ended up hurting plenty, both Mike himself and other people. Mostly other people. The nauseating sorrow he had felt every day since the accident welled up again, as fresh as the very first time. Grief for a dead child, of course, but also for the whole sorry mess; most of all, he supposed in honesty, for Mike himself.

*Snap*.

It was a comparatively small sound, nearly lost in the violence of the storm. Mike had allowed his attention to wander so that he had missed his footing on a slippery rock. His ankle had turned and something had given way. The pain was huge, like a nail hammered through the bone and it did not dull or fade, but grew, a blossoming poisonous bud. Mike went over on his side, throwing out an arm to break the fall. Another rock dealt a nauseating blow on his elbow as he hit the ground but his injured foot did not come free of the rocks. As the ankle twisted further, pain flared again, stepping up to a white-hot agony. Unable to stop himself, Mike shouted out.

He lay stunned, momentarily aware of nothing beyond the hurt but slowly, he became able to think again. He sat up, carefully. He tried to free his foot and found that it was caught fast. He sat up a little more and, although that hurt a lot, the pain didn’t overwhelm him. With one hand, he gingerly explored down his trapped leg, towards the ankle. He couldn’t see *how* he was trapped, he wasn’t even sure if his foot moved when he willed it. He pulled and twisted, but each movement brought a fresh wave of searing agony, making him pause to take deep breaths. The landscape around him, the stark blacks and whites of moonlight and night-shadow, became uniform grey and Mike knew that he would have to rest or risk falling into unconsciousness.

Very carefully he lay back and tried to clear his thoughts. Then, beneath an unblinking moon which had appeared briefly amongst the storm clouds, he sat up again, grasped his trapped leg just above the ankle, and yanked. He cried out again, the pain so immense that it was all of his world, and rolled to his side, his leg now free. When he was able he felt down his leg again, squeezing at the swelling flesh. The pain was awful, sickening. Walking on it would be difficult, next to impossible in fact. He crawled inland, sliding forwards on his side, the injured leg resting, as best he could manage, on top of his good leg as he inched along. He thought that he might be able to use some driftwood left by a high tide further up the beach as a make-shift crutch.

He kept Eleanor’s face at the forefront of his mind and crawled on.

Had he been on his feet, he would have found what he had looked for almost immediately but the debris cast up by the sea was at his eye-level, a world bounded by a horizon measurable in arm-spans. With one hand he clasped his leg, with the other he fumbled unseeing for anything that he could use as a support.

“Give me a fucking break!” Mike wailed into the teeth of the gale. “Please...”

At that moment, his fingers found the end of a slender plank of wood, the granting of his wish. Mike managed to heave himself upright to slot the plank under his arm. He set to hobbling on again, paying more attention to where he set his feet. His injured ankle sang with agony, each jarring step a note of purest pain. Wind lashed icy rain into his face, soothing on his burnt skin at first but before long all his exposed flesh was numbed beyond feeling.

Time had already ceased to run its normal course for Mike; now space also appeared to warp and shrink. He kept his eyes doggedly on the way ahead but in the corner of his vision he fancied that he saw lights, some inland, others far out to sea, in colours which danced at the very edge of his perception. The wind had a voice, pitched high and imprecise, but with a tone of unmistakable spite, revelling in his misfortune, as if it merrily considered throwing some other disaster in his path. After the burning and the breaking of bones would come…what? Drowning? Suffocation? He was a modern-day Job, tested to the point of destruction. But Job had been an innocent, hadn’t deserved all the awful things which happened to him. Mike couldn’t say the same about himself.

Then he found himself at the cave and immediately knew beyond any doubt that this was where he would find Eleanor. An urgent and persistent part of him insisted that he was too late. He stood up as tall as his pain would allow and set his face towards the unrevealing entrance.

*Chapter 47: Eleanor*

Eleanor had lain in the darkness for a time beyond her ability to calculate. Something awful had lain beside her, eroding her mind, as inevitably, as slowly flowing water will eventually hollow out a canyon. She dreamt, but her dreams all returned her to this place and she understood, without surprise, that the cave was nothing less than her life’s terminus. Her companion was small and she felt it twist in abnormal ways to adjust to her own position. She had long ago ceased to feel the ridges of cold stone that dug into her back, had even ceased to shiver now, starting to be almost warm. Even if that feeling was illusion, she felt what she felt, and at the end of the day – she *was* at the end of her day, she was certain of that – how was an illusion of warmth to be distinguished from the real thing?

She allowed her mind to wander. The shadow that lay with her urged Eleanor to die but it was not impatient – it still had a final job for her. She would know when the time came, and meanwhile it allowed her a little leeway to explore her past. She wasn’t going anywhere, after all.

Eleanor saw her childhood with awful clarity, those who had bullied her – she almost wanted to cheer them, to urge them to greater violence, greater hurt. She saw the family who had barely tolerated her for all those years, and found that she couldn’t blame them for their emotional shallowness. She was so weak, so pathetic, that no-one would be able to resist a casual cruelty. She thought about the island and the promise of redemptive power she had seen in it. It might have been possible for her to have reinvented herself in another, stronger image. But now the hour was late and it was time to speak honestly, even if only to herself; how many of those thoughts had in fact come from the island itself, strange and ancient? She knew it was more than rock, that it lived, in some alien way, and therefore it stood to reason that it had its own dreams too. Sometimes, she imagined, when the stars were right*,* the island came to its own version of wakefulness and would remake anything that happened to be in its orbit. It was a thin place where the worlds of man and the worlds of no-man were painfully close, close enough to see, and sometimes, to touch. Close enough that whatever inimical creatures existed in the hidden places of the universe might be able to see our world too. Or even to walk here. Eleanor was sure that the creature which lay next to her was just such a creeping thing.

She wondered how she had she come to the island. Try as she might, she couldn’t put together a convincing narrative: nothing seemed to make sense. The very act of trying to remember was hard, like trying to push a stalled car uphill. Had someone suggested working on the island to her? Once she thought that was the case but now she wasn’t so sure. A false memory, perhaps. It could have been that she made her way here because it was nothing less than her destiny. Better to think that than to suspect that she had been nothing more than incidental, collateral damage.

*Mike*…

The thought was cut off. She sensed the mood of her unwelcome partner darken. It twisted again and its head flopped over, bringing its face close to Eleanor’s own. One milky white eye opened, a blighted moon in an ink black sky, and the visage became the face of her mother before charring like burned paper. She felt anger flowing from it in enormous, sickening waves. Broken fingers flexed at the end of the creature’s arms, detaching sheets of skin that peeled off to dissolve into smoke. Then Eleanor saw something beyond, at the mouth of the cave, and it was so strange, so unexpected now, that at first she couldn’t process it. She wondered if this was another monster – it seemed to have too many legs, for one thing. But what she saw was a defined shape and there was detail, even with the vacillating moonlight at its back. Something about the way in which it stood was familiar, even if it also looked damaged. It was Mike.

First, there was a wave of purest joy. Then comprehension, as cold as ice. *This* was why she had been kept alive, to bait the island’s trap, about to snap shut on Mike. She reached her arms out behind her head and closed her hands around a huge rock, broader than her shoulders were wide. It might have lain on the floor of the cave for years, or for centuries, or it might have rolled in with the last storm, but whatever had provided it, Eleanor knew at once that it was *fitting*, in all senses of that word. She closed her hands around it, then hoisted it straight up and over her head. It was heavy, making her arms shake with the combination of strain and wildly pumping adrenalin. Some muscle or tendon popped in her shoulder. Not to worry, she told herself. This was a one-time-only lift. She turned her head to the side. Not in order to avoid seeing the rock fall but because a blow to the temple was more likely to crush her skull. Eleanor hoped that she would be able to carry out her final task properly, that there would be no mistakes. The creature loomed over her and leant itself upon the stone, pushing down, all the time smiling her mother’s tired smile. Eleanor opened her hands and the boulder fell.

*Chapter 48: Death again*

Mike hobbled into the cave with barely enough time for his vision to adjust to the gloom before catching sight of Eleanor. She was lying on the ground, shrouded in thick shadows. He couldn’t quite make out what she was doing – it had looked as if she was holding some object above her own head but as he watched, Eleanor released it to drop with a sickening crunch, the sound of her head being crushed.

“No!” Mike shouted but already too late. He started forward, but his make-shift crutch betrayed him, slipping away to collapse him face down onto the floor of the cave. He lay stunned by the impact and by what he had seen. Then, for the second time that night, he was crawling. Eleanor was gone, replaced by a nightmare vision: a body topped with stone instead of a head. It was too dark in the cave to see Eleanor’s blood, but Mike could smell it, and even *feel* it, a metallic slime that clogged the back of his throat. He retched up a painful stream of bile.

He dragged himself into a sitting position to let some tiny and still rational part of his mind try to take account. Alex and Eleanor were both dead; Alex’s blood was on his hands; might he have been able to save Eleanor? Perhaps if he hadn’t stumbled on the beach; if he hadn’t fought with her over the radio; if he had said *this* or done *that*. There seemed to be enough pain and guilt to go around, and more than enough. Mike let his mind wander, and it meandered with steady determination away from all of his pain, past and present.

Something attracted his attention. He looked around, every movement made with a high price to pay in hurt. Had he seen something? Heard something? He couldn’t be sure. He forced himself to look across at Eleanor’s body. He seemed to see her turning, as if twisting around to look at him. But, of course, that was impossible – she no longer had eyes with which to see. Then it was clearer to Mike – it wasn’t Eleanor that was moving, but something which moved *across* her. Whatever it was, it flowed like thick oil. Mike saw arms with shadow-hands that snatched at the floor of the cave, and whilst they seemed to gain no purchase, the darkness still managed to creep over Eleanor’s body. It braced against the rock which Eleanor had used to crush her own head, shifting it with a wet, purring sound.

Mike scrambled backwards, the shadow keeping pace. He knew that he must not take his gaze from whatever it was that sought him. Like a parody, it too pulled a broken body. He had the strongest feeling that if he got out of the cave, it couldn’t follow. Maybe this cave was the binding place. Maybe what appeared as a shadow against shadows could not move where the lack of light was not absolute? Mike wanted to believe that this was the ghost of a murdered pirate boy and he tried hard to keep conflicting thoughts at bay. Yet those thoughts came, bidden or not:

*The faces recognised by Alex’s program –* they *weren’t in the cave*.

*Whatever they had seen on the mainland after their evening out –* that *hadn’t been in the cave.*

*Everything else – the half-seen and the half-felt that has surrounded them from day one – all of those things happened* outside *the cave.*

He chased those thoughts away and instead tried to focus his energies on a renewed effort to escape, unwittingly reversing Eleanor’s earlier path into the cave, sliding out backwards. His pursuer disappeared around an outcrop for a second, then reared up over the top, groping for purchase. It lolled over the rock, and for Mike the very worst thing was that it made no noise, that it crept onwards in perfect silence. To see something so damaged still moving relentlessly made Mike hate it. He wanted to see it fall and break, to hear the limbs snap, to smell its putrid blood in the enclosed air. But even that crystalline hatred was dwarfed by fear. The notion that he might make a stand, take up whatever primitive weapons were at hand, never occurred to him. The only sane thing to do was to flee, to maintain the few paces-worth which separated him from the obscenity. He scooted right on top of his ersatz crutch and managed to gather it to him without slowing. He knew that it would be next-to-impossible to get back upright without taking his eyes off the other, if only for a second, but to have his crutch back, home-made as it was, filled him with the reassuring sense of at last having a weapon, no matter how mean, of no longer being so naked.

Another shadow lengthened in front of him, this one his own, cast by the weak moonlight which glanced out from behind the rainclouds. This was something of Mike’s world, so it was welcome, meaning that he was approaching, behind his back, the mouth of the cave and the wholesome reality beyond. He backed down the beach and into the tide, to his knees, then to his hips. A wave broke against his back, momentarily blinding him with salt water. He struggled to keep his footing but another wave caught him and flung him forward. He overbalanced and found himself under the water, taking in a lungful of bitter brine. Still half-blinded, he could imagine the monster taking form through the water, the mist and the sand, then wading down into the sea, reaching for him with decaying talons. Desperately, he wiped the stinging water out of his eyes. His arms flailed, and he heard that he was mewling like a trapped animal. Yet, as his vision cleared, there was no monster shambling over the smooth pebbles toward him. Within the cavern, he thought he could see a tiny shape, hanging back in the darkness, as if afraid to come further. Mike felt a wild elation, and he was shouting – screaming, in fact - as he edged out of the surf.

“I win!” Mike yelled. “I win.” He stopped: one foot was already numb with cold, the other was gripped by pain like fire. His head, cut open at some time he couldn’t bring to mind, was open to the bone, oozing blood. His face, seared with fire, was as tight as a mask. He would have to explain two suspicious deaths and it had already occurred to him that he would be a murder suspect, even if he ever managed to get off the island. Yet, none of that mattered, because he was out of the cave and he could begin the process of rationalising what he had found there, a camp-fire story to relive only in his deepest nightmares. He could still see his pursuer, the very essence of shadow, an absence not just of light but of everything in the world of light. He wondered if he should try to make his way back along the beach, the way he had come – if any rescue was coming, that would be the most likely landing spot. On the other hand, getting to the summit of the island would afford him a great view of the surrounding sea – he would be able to see rescue arriving and go to meet it. Mike hobbled back along the shore-line, keeping an eye on the mouth of the cave, gaping like an insatiable maw. He made a step, hauled his bad leg to him, dragged himself forward again. Then he watched in mute horror as a child-shape stepped in time with him, out of the cave and into the world of the light.

*Chapter 49: Archie and John*

The weather was turning rapidly and it had been one of those days, which became one of those nights, when the lobsters seemed to have made the collective decision not to let themselves get captured. It happened from time to time.

John was working at the stern, coiling ropes, stacking empty pots. Archie at the helm decided to take the boat inshore a bit – they were on the leeward side of the island so he was thinking that it would be an idea to get them still closer to land. Their boat rose with the waves and crashed down in the troughs, making slow but steady progress. Suddenly, he smelt something burning.

“Shit!” he said, looking round for the source. If it was the engine, they could be in trouble on a night like this. Then it became obvious that this was nothing to do with the boat - whatever was burning, the stink was all around them, it had to be way bigger than anything on board. He sounded the horn and when John looked up gestured that he should join Archie in the cabin. Archie rolled up the boat, swaying with the waves until he met his friend. The two men leant together as if conspiring, each with a hand on the other’s shoulder to keep themselves upright as waves turned beneath them.

“Do you smell smoke?” Archie asked. It was more statement than question.

“I do,” John said simply.

“Has to be coming from the island,” Archie said. To John, his old friend suddenly looked beyond tired – old, even. As if a dozen years had collapsed onto him all at once, squeezing him down.

“We better have a look.” John was stoic but they both appreciated how dangerous this situation might become.

“Aye, so we should,” Archie agreed. He opened up the throttle and the engine roared, another noise in a gathering maelstrom. The boat edged around the headland, parallel to the bay where the islanders had once moored their own craft. The two men could see that the buildings were blazing and with the rain cycling from light drizzle to full-throated torrent, smoke billowed in thick swarms. As the two fishermen watched, the roof caved in with an animal screech that made the hair on their arms stand up. Bits of smouldering wood and sparks shot into the air to be snatched away by the winds. Smaller fires blazed away at all points.

“Dear God, John. What are we to do?” Archie asked.

“Go look for….,” John didn’t want to use the word *survivors* – it sounded very final.

“Anybody,” Archie supplied.

John agreed. “Aye. Anybody.”

They tried to manoeuvre the boat closer to the shore but the swell was large enough to pick them up and ground them if they got too close. Archie repeatedly took the craft towards the island but was forced to veer away as the boat was thrown about by capricious wind and waves.

“I’ll call it in,” John shouted over the increasing din. “They may not have had a chance to contact the coastguard if this took hold quickly and it may not be visible from the mainland. God almighty, if no-one else has seen this….”

“You do that,” Archie shouted back. He wrestled with the wheel, although it was becoming obvious that on their present course they were minutes away from ending up crushed against the rocks and drowned themselves.

“The chance of a message getting through is evens, at best,” John said. The radio produced nothing but squawking.

They made a few more approaches, before Archie pulled them back into the wind-shadow of the island.

“We’d best drop one of us off,” Archie said. “There’s nowhere to moor but I reckon one of us would be able to jump off and make it to shore at the north end if we were close enough.”

John nodded, and turned to his task.

*Chapter 50: Mike*

The chase began afresh. Sometimes the pursuer fell back for a time, allowing Mike to gain some ground, but then closed in again. It wasn’t lost on Mike that this had all the hallmarks of a game. With his clothes sodden, Mike’s weight was virtually doubled, making every step feel like pushing through setting concrete. Every part of him alternated between a deathly lack of feeling and blistering, almost incapacitating, pain. He was being herded; he knew that. For what purpose, he couldn’t say. He found an upward path and climbed, falling onto his hands and knees, dragging behind him the plank which had earlier acted as his support. Whatever came in his wake was well used to stealing along the ground and it followed relentlessly.

There was the echoing boom of far-away thunder and Mike saw a meteor rise, against all the demands of physics, into the sky. He watched it ascend and then begin a wide arc of descent, flying right over his head to plunge into the sea. A part of him, still functioning, was matter-of-factly sure that he had just seen one of the gas canisters taking to the air, jet-propelled by its own highly flammable contents. The cage in which they were stored was against the wall of the main building and he supposed that they had been sufficiently heated by this time. If there was anyone watching from the mainland they might think it was some sort of insane fireworks display.

From the cabin of their boat on the other side of the island, John and Archie watched the rise and fall of the gas canister in open mouthed amazement and not a little dread. These imitation rockets underlined how severely out of kilter things on the island had become.

Mike was tearing up wet clods of earth as he climbed, throwing the mud out behind him like a digging dog, not that he seriously thought it would slow down whatever was behind him. He didn’t think that there was anything he could do which *would* slow it. For the first time, he asked himself: *why are you still running?* Since the entity had stepped out of the entrance to the caves, Mike had moved on instinct. He had no doubt that it had been responsible for Eleanor’s death, nor that it meant to do him harm as well. There was precious little hope left; no hope that he would escape the island, nor that there would be a rescue. Thinking that, he slowed down, and that was a relief. He wondered if he would feel a dead hand upon his shoulder, how the end would come. He found that it didn’t seem to matter so much to him anymore.

*Chapter 51: Archie and John*

“Sure you want to do this?” Archie asked. “We could just motor away, go back home and no-one would be any the wiser.”

“Very sure that I *don’t* want to do this.” John was focussed on preparing for the ordeal to come. “But is there a choice? If we motor away, what then? Every time we come past this God-forsaken island, for the rest of our lives, we’ll think about what might-have-been, the folk we might’ve been able to save.”

“We didn’t save…,” Archie began but John cut him off.

“No more,” he said.

They decided to find the most sheltered area and get as close to shore as they could. John would go overboard, attached to a line so that if he couldn’t make it to shore he could reel himself back in. Archie knew that John was strong – he had worked a lifetime pulling up nets heavy with fish and lines of lobster pots, so if anyone was able to pull themselves back on board a lurching ship, it would be John. If he did make it to land, then he could cut himself free. Archie would then motor off to raise the coastguard, assuming that they had not already been alerted. It seemed like a workable plan but both men were experienced enough to recognise the possibility that something could go catastrophically wrong. The great unknown was, of course, the island itself. The island had always been a place to be shunned, simply because in their secret hearts they had always suspected that it wasn’t right, wasn’t *healthy*. Now, finally, they might be about to find out what it was that lay beneath that bone-deep intuition.

Archie finished knotting the rope around his friend and gave some experimental tugs. The danger was not so much that the harness might slip off, Archie thought, as that it might get fouled around John as he swam. In that case, John would have to cut himself free before he planned and trust his fate to the sea. Which was never a great idea, Archie thought miserably. The knife had to be somewhere that John could reach easily, so they decided to put it in a sheath fastened outside of his shirt. Archie would have felt happier giving John a second knife as well, in case the first got lost in the swim but John had refused.

“*You* may need it,” John had said.

“What for?”

“You might need it to cut *me* loose,” John had met his friend’s gaze steadily until Archie had been forced to look away.

So, they had watched the gas canister take its spectacular journey and when it had disappeared John had whistled softly in amazement.

“There might not be anyone left,” Archie said.

“Maybe not,” John allowed. “But we had best find out for sure. I’m ready to go.”

John swung his legs over the side and pitched himself into the water. He bobbed for a second or two, air-filled clothes and the bulky life preserver all riding up under his chin, before he turned on his front and struck out for the shore, which suddenly looked very distant. Archie let the rope run out behind his friend. His progress was terribly slow, John more thrown about by wind and tide than swimming. Archie kept a hand on the wheel, occasionally nudging the vessel one way or the other, careful not to put a strain on the lifeline.

John was still in the water as the first softening of the sky announced the coming of dawn.

. . .

In the months that followed, Archie would be called upon to answer a lot of questions and he would be witness to pain and suffering which only ever seemed to deepen, to become, impossibly, ever more bitter: he would see Bramley Haigh return to the mainland pale as death after visiting the burnt-out ruin of his business. Then Archie would see Haigh grow paler still, clutching at his chest as he collapsed. Haigh lived long enough to get to hospital but did not survive the second, still more devastating heart attack which came a few weeks later. Archie never got the chance to ask Haigh if he had suspected that there was some ungodly presence on the island and, if so, why he had allowed those three poor people to try to spend their winter there.

There were, however, lots of theories about the remains that were found on the island, and the ways in which they had died – there was mention of suicide but some – many - whispered *murder* as well. There were nights when there was talk of things darker still.

Archie saw a group of academics from down south shake their heads sadly over a laptop which had been recovered from the island. Apparently, the younger of the two men on the island had been some sort of maths genius but whatever he had been doing recently had mostly been on the laptop, by their account, and now the machine was ruined beyond repair. Archie saw John’s family mourning and he mourned with them, and he saw the folk who had known John all his life say their farewells, as best they could, when they gathered for his memorial service.

What Archie never saw was what had happened to John. At one moment the line had been unwinding from Archie’s hands, then it was momentarily pulled tight, before slackening again. Archie knew that John was gone, with a certainty which brooked no doubt, but he steered the boat about and began the search, just as they had sometimes practiced in quieter moments. Now he had to fight against a panic that would engulf him faster than the rising waves. Archie zig-zagged as best he could over the area up-water and he played the beam of the ship’s lantern onto the churning waters. He tried the radio again, and he launched the boat’s flares, but no-one had come and if anyone had seen, they must have turned away, hoping that someone else would step up to the challenge.

*Chapter 52: The Island*

Mike kept moving but more slowly now, no longer driven by a compulsion to survive but by some other, even more basic instinct. Above him, the dome of the sky turned and by imperceptible degrees brightened into morning. When he stopped to rest, the abomination which kept pace with him stopped as well. He half-thought that he could experiment with it, that if he were to start moving back down the path it would retreat, keep the same distance between them. In the end, he simply moved forward, too tired for any more games.

During the night – or perhaps after the dawn, time had taken on an elastic quality which stretched his perception nauseatingly – he was aware of something like a searchlight, dipping up over the summit of the land and then disappearing again. Another gas canister might have gone over his head as well, or it could have been a part of the storm, which sometimes blew fit to peel him off the face of the earth, but was now slowly subsiding into a breeze deceiving with its gentleness.

At the top of the island, Mike turned around and got to his feet. It didn’t matter to him now whether or not he kept what followed him in view. He moved over to where the land fell away. He had never had a great head for heights, but that fear too seemed to have deserted him so that he could look down at the rocks below without the vertiginous feeling that invisible hands were at his back, ready to push. He felt something approach from behind, became aware that it was close to him, close enough that if he turned he would be able to reach out and touch it. In the daylight he would finally see what had come after him – not just from the cave, but what had followed him *to* the island and had waited, impatiently Mike was sure, for the island to provide the opening it needed to return to him. If he looked back he would see the ruined features of the child he had killed and would see a dreadful lust for revenge burning in its dead eyes. His other choice would be to step out over the edge of the cliff and fall into the abyss.

As the sun rose higher, the gulls chattered brightly in the newly brilliant blue sky and Mike made his decision.

***Identity Dissolved in Isolation: The Contrasting Notions of Density and ‘Thin-ness’ in Haunted Places in the Literature of the Supernatural from the 18th Century to the Modern Age, With Particular Reference to Works by Shirley Jackson, Stephen King and John Langan, and the development of these themes in the writing of* No Man*.***

**Submitted to the University of Derby as a Dissertation towards the degree of Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing**

**2021, Resubmitted 2022**

*For Sheena, always there for me.*

Abstract

My aim is to illustrate the development of inter-related themes of personal identity and isolation, in both physical and psychological senses, within the literature of the supernatural and to trace the development of a treatment of the horror of physical and mental disintegration which is increasingly psychologically-aware both in authors and readership through the introduction of ‘the thin place’ as a trope as it became an explicit feature of stories within ‘horror fiction’.

To begin this thesis I will offer explanations of some key terms relating to the literature of the supernatural, incorporated within a necessarily brief historical review in Chapter 1, *DEFINING THE INDEFINABLE: The Development of Themes of ‘Thin-ness’ Within Stories of the Supernatural From Early History to The Gothic.*

In literary works predating the arrival of ‘the Gothic’ as a distinctly identified form, I will show that there is no clear boundary demarcating the ‘natural’ from the ‘supernatural’. This boundary becomes more clearly defined in later literature wherein the ‘supernatural’ is increasingly seen as a wholly separate, often inimical realm. I will demonstrate that the notion of ‘density’ which I will identify as emerging more fully and precisely in the later twentieth century should be seen as representing a ‘consensual reality’ in contrast to the ‘indeterminacy’ which is one characteristic of the supernatural. In the course of this investigation, I will draw upon a number of different approaches, including definitions of the various associated genres in Section 1.2, with an exploration in sections 1.3 and 1.3.3 *Critical Engagement: The Horrors of Isolation and The Dissolution of Identity,* of some major critical currents shaping the treatment of these themes. This will be linked to the psychological insight which views irruption through ‘thin-ness’ as a transgressive motif, often including both metaphorical and literal ‘penetration of the boundaries’ - metaphysical, as between planes of existence, and physical, as in penetration of the flesh. Thus a new understanding of a hitherto familiar literary trope in this stream of fiction was developed, combining the psychological horror of isolation, the physiological horror of ‘penetration’ (with concomitant death a likely outcome) and a third, metaphysical element of horror in the face of modes of existence wholly inimical to humanity.

In Chapter 2, *THIN PLACES: Setting as Character in Jackson, King and Langan,* the works of Shirley Jackson, Stephen King and John Langan, along with material from other authors working within broadly similar traditions, will be examined and compared to reveal common threads in their treatment of isolation in ‘thin places’ along with the subsequent dissolution of the ‘density’ of identity suffered by their characters. I will reference the ways in which particular settings have been used in stories by these authors, namely the ‘haunted places’, increasingly described as ‘thin places’, where the boundary between natural and supernatural is easily traversed. In the course of this examination, I will demonstrate the continuing emergence, and import of, the notion of ‘density’ as a marker of normality, in contrast to the ‘thin’ nature of the boundary with the transgressive supernatural, and also show some of the ways in which this treatment manifests in modern stories of the supernatural. This trope, I contend, has developed following a conscious ‘psychologisation’ of the experience of writing and reading tales of the supernatural which suggests a blurring of traditional boundaries of inner and outer experience, and, by extension, of reality and fantasy. I will also demonstrate some of the ways in which this particular stream of literature of the transgressive has developed to reflect the concerns of readerships of the time. There will be a focus upon elements which became of central importance in attempts to define the genre: issues concerning setting as character; and of identity and ontology, the latter in the sense of exploring *what there is*. I will seek to show how dissolution of identity plays a key part in many related genre stories, and how this dissolution is reflected in the themes and language used in the texts as ‘thinning’. The notion of ‘density’ is taken as being of fundamental importance in modern novels of the supernatural placed within the tradition of ‘Contemporary Gothic’ (as opposed to the more thematic concerns of the ‘new Gothic’). In modern times, physical and mental injury have both become seen as methods for demonstrating the dissolution of identity, in which both body and psyche wear thin (as examined in section 2.2.5).

In the third chapter, the thesis sets out a thematic record of the process of the creation of my novel of the supernatural, *No Man*, tracing influences, techniques and methodologies employed in two sections: looking at characters and settings in section 3.1, and at autobiographical influences on the roots of the story in section 3.2. I will identify where the novel draws upon the methodologies outlined previously, and where it consciously draws upon contrasts of exteriority and interiority and where the boundary which separates these contrasts becomes foregrounded.

Finally, I will attempt to place my novel within the literary tradition of tales of the supernatural, and bring to bear an authorial analysis, with explanations of the ways in which elements described above are developed within the story. This element of the thesis will aim to illuminate ways in which traditional themes, tropes and motifs of isolation and the dissolution of identity have been incorporated in a modern novel of the supernatural, developing the contrasting notions of density and ‘thin-ness’ as major thematic concerns and plot elements.

***Identity Dissolved in Isolation: The Contrasting Notions of Density and ‘Thin-ness’ in Haunted Places in the Literature of the Supernatural from the 18th Century to the Modern Age, With Particular Reference to Works by Shirley Jackson, Stephen King and John Langan, and the development of these themes in the writing of No Man.***

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‘We are lost, both as individuals and as a culture. For over 2,000 years we have believed in the possibility of a single true account of the world. Now this age, the age of truth, is coming to a close.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

‘…the beginning is already haunted.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

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Originality and Contribution to Knowledge

The contribution to knowledge made in the current thesis is to be found in examination of the concepts of thin-ness and density as these have appeared in works of fiction foregrounding the supernatural. I shall demonstrate that concepts of density and thin-ness, and their cognates, have become increasingly verifiable genre-trends as we move from mid-twentieth century fiction through to the present. The thesis examines the use of these concepts by a number of writers, with a particular focus upon works by Shirley Jackson, Stephen King and John Langan in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, in original comparative analyses of three works: Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, King’s *The Shining* and Langan’s *House of Windows*. The thesis also seeks to show the evolution of the concepts, moving from major psychological insight to accepted trope. Within my own novel, *No Man*, I deploy these concepts in ways intended to reference these writers and also the wider thematic concerns related to thin-ness and density, showing how physical and psychical isolation in ‘haunted places’ can work in such a story to strip away essential elements of personhood. The novel itself is wholly original and is intended to further develop the notions of density as used within associated genres, as discussed subsequently, and thereby to introduce a new facet to the notion of ‘the haunted place’.

A further source of both originality and contribution to knowledge comes in the detailed interrogation of themes in works by John Langan, with whom there is currently a relatively small amount of scholarly critical engagement.

Details of the methodology which will reveal the original nature of the thesis and its contribution to knowledge will be found within the Introduction which follows.

Introduction

A concept familiar to those who have enjoyed tales incorporating the supernatural over centuries is the notion of the ‘haunted place’, being an area, building or location which is the loci of unpleasant supernatural (or purportedly supernatural) events. The ways in which individuals react to such places is a staple of such tales.[[3]](#footnote-3) In modern stories, these haunted places have increasingly been not merely places where bad things happen, but ‘bad places’ in and of themselves – intrinsically bad, and generally with at least a vestige of malevolent sentience.[[4]](#footnote-4) The opening review in Chapter 1 will focus upon the development of various themes within the story of the supernatural, in particular the notion of a ‘bad place’ as sketched above. The scope of even such a limited review is very large indeed, even when restricted only to examination of works which place a particular emphasis upon location.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the course of this focus, I aim to point towards some general definitional boundaries and to carry out a preliminary investigation into the themes, tropes and motifs which touch upon isolation and identity. Subsequently I will examine ways in which these particular themes become exemplified through a consideration of the notion of density; firstly as a demonstration that density is representative of the safe, material world, and secondly to demonstrate that ‘thin-ness’ suggests the easy intrusion of the inimical; the inhuman and the anti-human. Finally, I will point towards ways in which these ‘thin skins’ separating realities can be seen as analogous to the frailty of skin, the organ which metaphorically and literally separates ‘normal’ life from the chaos of annihilation. I will seek to demonstrate that these themes emerge gradually to become, by the twenty-first century, a major components of many of the sorts of stories under examination. It will be recognised within this essay that the many and various genre labels and definitions overlap to a very considerable degree – and although there is valuable insight to be gained from exploring these definitions, my proper interest lies in investigating a trend which has worked across definitional boundaries. Stories within such loose boundaries have had a multitude of labels: described variously as Gothic, horror, supernatural, or uncanny, for example. Therefore I propose a modernist approach towards these stories, dealing as they do with fragmentation and ambiguity in which multiple narratives question and undermine any sense of there being a unitary ‘reality’.[[6]](#footnote-6) There is a temptation to adopt what is essentially an operationalist approach.[[7]](#footnote-7) That is to say that stories which will fall under my purview are those in which I have an interest, and that will, ultimately, have to serve as an appropriate genre-label. [[8]](#footnote-8) However, I will also aim to elucidate some of the overlapping elements of the sub-genres discussed, drawing upon attributed positions in the relevant scholarship.

I will demonstrate, *inter alia*, how the story of the supernatural, as with other forms of literature, has developed in tandem with the concerns of the times.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus the emergence of psychological explanations of behaviour and the development of psychological ‘readings’ of literature in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries onwards have introduced a fresh and fertile focus for creating and examining such stories.[[10]](#footnote-10) The ‘bad place’, standing outside of the societal ‘norm’ and often also geographically removed, thus doubly isolated, takes on a psychological importance which makes it comparable to an isolated *person* and so entirely likely to be susceptible to the same sorts of psychoses. In Chapter 1, section 1, looking at very early tales containing supernatural elements, I will show that the ‘bad places’ in these tales are almost by definition removed from societal ‘normality’ as well - such ‘normality’ being exactly the consensus formed by the aggregate consciousness of large numbers of people. The tradition of geographical remove has persevered until very recently in the idea that the ‘haunted house’ was likely to be located somewhere remote – at the very least, on the outskirts of town, for example.[[11]](#footnote-11) I will track the increasing emergence of the concept of the ‘bad place’ as being ‘thin’ – a place where boundaries between realms of existence are strained to the point of being readily ruptured, with the intention of showing in sections 1.3.3 and 1.3.6 how these concerns are reflected in an increasing psychological awareness. There is interplay between the isolation of protagonists as contributing towards the thin nature of the reality on the one hand, and the thin nature of these realities as acting in ways which diminish and isolate the protagonists, which is also followed up in examination of the theme in *No Man* in the final section. This interest in ‘other spaces’ also reflects a shift in (some) more recent stories towards what writer Joel Lane (1963 – 2013) described as ‘ontological horror’:

Horror Fiction was…an attempt to generate new myths – or a new kind of imagination – that could deal with …new realities.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Most disturbing is the possibility that when we discover these new realities, layered against our own and contacted when the barriers usually separating these spaces are worn thin to the point of breaching, we will find those ‘other’ spaces are inimical to us, actively desiring not just our destruction but our utter annihilation, our erasure.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In the latter part of Chapter 1, I aim to draw out relevant trends of the dissolution of identity within more recent tales of the supernatural. The development of these trends within my own novel-length work, *No Man*, will be traced in the final Chapter, seeking to place that work within the traditions discussed through its own use of the motif of ‘thin-ness’ and associated themes.

In modern visions of the supernatural realm, wherein generally accepted physical laws and moral guidelines are dissolved, our sense of personhood is weakened, threatening to disappear along with the social mores and physical rules which have framed that sense.[[14]](#footnote-14) A more overtly psychological reading, following Donald Winnicott (1896 – 1976) sees the ‘thin’ nature of reality reflected in the physical boundary which is the skin, separating whatever is ‘outside’ from the ‘inner’, thus becoming the transitional surface from ‘personhood’ (within) to the contrasted ‘otherness’ without – that ‘otherness’ being annihilation.[[15]](#footnote-15) I will show in section 1.1 that there is good reason to think that clear (literary) demarcations were developing by Elizabethan times between inner and outer states, and more interest was therefore exploring in the boundary conditions between these states. Using critical analysis suggested by Freudian criticism, I will seek to explore in section 1.3.3 how the sense of the uncanny produced by the effective literary works under discussion arises out of the transition between one state and another, that process whereby the world of the ordinary gives way to that of the supernatural.[[16]](#footnote-16) In metaphysical terms that boundary becomes thin as consensual reality breaks down; in physical terms our skin *is* that terribly thin boundary. A considerable source of the ‘frisson’ of reading the variety of supernatural literature discussed above comes from probing the ‘thin’ nature of the liminal area separating the reassuring density of the ‘real’ from the disconcerting (potential) chaos of the ‘supernatural’.[[17]](#footnote-17) The influences of the modernist movements will be explored in section 1.4. I will seek to show in Chapter 2, through closer examination of particular authors, that this investigation itself reflects our psychological concerns with body and identity, examining surrender of identity in section 2.1 in the works of Shirley Jackson (1916 – 1965). I will argue that Jackson engages with this theme in her works, concerned as they often are with issues of female identity, and with the transformative effects of violence.[[18]](#footnote-18)

I will extend the study into section 2.2. by examining ways in which isolation is used as a trope to explain reduction of identity over time. Also in section 2.2., examining parts of the work of Stephen King (b. 1947), I will show how the notion of skin as a barrier to be transgressed in ‘horror’ becomes one of the more important currents in the literature, and how this links to ‘thin-ness’ in those writings. With liminal and transitional locations marking a defining feature of the ‘traditional’ tales of the type under examination and notions of density shown to be developing psychological alongside ontological issues, becoming definitional features of a type of emerging fiction, we shall see that evolutions of the genre self-consciously place these ‘thin’ structures in the narrative foreground. Such movement between states of being will necessarily involve a process of ‘breaking through’ boundaries: between natural and supernatural, for example, between living and dead, or between the inner and the outer. The ‘thin place’ is described and named explicitly in works by Stephen King, but in examining *The Shining* in section 2.2, I seek to interrogate the ways in which exterior and interior narratives become fused in this work: the worsening weather within the story, for example, immures the family in snow, enforcing a physical segregation from wider society which reflects the mental isolation of the protagonists upon which the entity which is the Overlook Hotel can feed.[[19]](#footnote-19) This in turn leads to the dissolution of identity for the main (adult) protagonist, a personal catastrophe which has become one of the defining features of the modern supernatural story – and a genuinely scary prospect even to those unmoved by haunted houses, ghoulies, ghosties and long-legged beasties.[[20]](#footnote-20) The flesh or the skin is perhaps the most familiar, pertinent and personal of all ‘boundaries’ for us living organisms, fragile as blown glass.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In section 2.3, using the works of John Langan (b. 1969) I will seek to show how these themes have been drawn together in recent literature to present a picture of reality as being ‘dense’ physically, metaphorically and metaphysically. As well as tracing the development of the theme of ‘reality-as-thin’ in works by Langan, in particular his novel *House of Windows*, I also intend to demonstrate, *inter alia*, how self-reference, which is common in the genre, has magnified the effect of the emergent trope of ‘thin-ness’. As that trope has been absorbed and adapted by emergent writers, it has become so familiar that it requires little or no further explanation.[[22]](#footnote-22) The trope, in turn, has come to include powerful and essentially modernist notions of the horror of the dissolution of identity.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In the final chapters, looking at my own creative work, I will place *No Man* within the broad categorisation of ‘the (traditional) Gothic’, but also show how I intend the work to interrogate a critical and creative ‘gap’ which knowingly exploits the ‘thin place’ as simultaneously plot device, character, and definitional element in order to add to what should be the primary aim of any such story – to produce real disquiet in the reader, and at best to provoke a sense of wonder at new possibilities – however strange or awful – which have been revealed.[[24]](#footnote-24)

For the purposes of this work, I will be understanding the following terms as described: firstly, a *theme* to be a central idea.[[25]](#footnote-25) Secondly, a *trope* I will take to be a developed figurative or rhetorical device.[[26]](#footnote-26) Finally, a *motif* I will consider to be recurrent image or pattern.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Chapter One

DEFINING THE INDEFINABLE:

DEFINING THE INDEFINABLE: The Development of Themes of ‘Thin-ness’ within Stories of the Supernatural From Early History Through The Gothic to Modernity

1. **Stories of the Supernatural: Definitional Scope**

In this chapter I propose undertaking a necessarily incomplete overview of the supernatural in literature, with a closer examination of some relevant recurrent themes within such tales. I will aim to illuminate some of the central notions discussed in this thesis: identity, isolation, and, increasingly into the Twenty-first century, the role played by ‘density’ as an emerging theme becoming central to the corpus of literature under examination, as exemplified in the three works under particular examination in Section 2, and as developed within my own novel, *No Man*. The supernatural appears within a number of literary genres, but until comparatively recently was generally malevolent, or at least a herald of ill omen. More recently, and in particular in young adult works, supernatural entities have adopted a more ambiguous character, allowing for some parts of the readership to identify with supernatural protagonists (and thus, by analogy, also with ‘the Other’ in ‘real-life’ contexts). [[28]](#footnote-28) Supernatural fiction can be understood as dealing with entities and processes forever beyond (naturalistic) explanation – placed ‘outside’ of our understanding of the world and its workings.[[29]](#footnote-29) Thus, it has been argued critically that the treatment of the supernatural in works *of* ‘the supernatural’ from *The Castle of Otranto* onwards points the reader to allegorical and moral interpretations of the stories rather than realistic-historical readings.[[30]](#footnote-30) Thus, supernatural fiction can be classified as a discrete genre defined by the ‘backgrounding’ of elements important to other sub-genres; so, horror may be present, but it is secondary to the recognition of the presence of the supernatural, for example.[[31]](#footnote-31) In supernatural fiction, then, magic and monsters are not the norm and the mystery of such things is an important element of the story itself.

The family of genres associated with these stories is notoriously hard to define. It is instructional that there is a notable lack of agreement even on a universally accepted name for the tales I will be considering: Gothic (subdivided into Contemporary Gothic, Classic Gothic, Neo-Gothic, Victorian Gothic, Steampunk Gothic, Feminist Gothic and so on)?[[32]](#footnote-32) Horror? Tales of suspense? The Macabre? Or more recently: Dark fantasy? Slipstream?[[33]](#footnote-33) All these appellations have their proponents and critics. I will not aim at arguing for one definition over others, but will content myself with examination of stories in which the supernatural as defined above plays a central part. However, I will attempt, in section 1.3.2 to give some widely accepted definitions of some of the relevant sub-genres and point towards some common currents. Whilst recognising that the historical process of definition-finding has revealed some interesting and useful notions, I will try to avoid using descriptions which are too precise, so as not to risk excluding some of those stories I wish to examine.[[34]](#footnote-34)

If ‘the supernatural in literature’ is difficult to pin to a specific genre or set of genres, the notion of the supernatural itself is possibly an even more contentious concept. Arguably anything that actually happens is, by definition, natural.[[35]](#footnote-35) If the tales of supernatural are restricted to those things which cannot (and thus do not) happen, they would seem to automatically lose the ‘sense of wonder’, or most of the ability to cause disquiet, surely key elements of such tales.[[36]](#footnote-36) To allow for a measure of flexibility, I will take ‘the supernatural’ to refer to anything not accepted contemporaneously as being ‘natural’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Thus, as described above, the term will include, although not be limited to, ghosts, shape-changers, psychic abilities, and, of course, those *places* which are intrinsically, or as a result of historical processes, *evil*. Thus, ‘supernatural tales’ will include, or allude to, at least one such element, understood as ‘supernatural’ as opposed to ‘paranormal’.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Supposedly ‘canonical’ authors such as Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870), Henry James (1843 – 1916), E. M. Forster (1879 – 1970) and D. H. Lawrence (1885 – 1930) all ‘dipped their toes’ to some extent or another into the Stygian waters of the literary supernatural.[[39]](#footnote-39) Forster introduces an ambiguity surrounding the events in the Marabar caves in *A Passage to India,* explored in more detail in relation to the ways in which we can approach ‘thin places’ in section 1.3.4 below. [[40]](#footnote-40)

The ‘Gothic’ tale arrived in the eighteenth century, recognised as such by virtue of a ‘family’ of characteristics, as investigated more fully in section 1.2, below. Charles Dickens included elements of the supernatural in many of his works, and unashamedly incorporated Gothic imagery wholesale into his writings – in *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, for example.[[41]](#footnote-41) Following on, as Roger Luckhurst describes, over the course of the nineteenth century ‘…the furniture of the Gothic was then dispersed, placed here and there in the nooks and crannies of the Victorian house of fiction…’[[42]](#footnote-42) In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this ‘Gothic furniture’ re-emerges into the foreground as a hybrid of Decadence and Victorian rationalism.[[43]](#footnote-43) McGrath and Morrow point out that the Gothic was once characterised by ‘…the props and settings it employed, *by its furniture* [their emphasis]’[[44]](#footnote-44)

The ‘new Gothic’, on the other hand, is defined more by a common *feeling*, a revelling in the atmosphere, for the most part unconcerned with (details of) the furniture, content with the outlines and suggestions that it makes to a holistic ‘Gothic picture’.[[45]](#footnote-45) That sense of revelling, a *yearning* for the fantastic in contrast, perhaps, to the *ennui* produced by mundane reality also appears in those stories which more properly continue the conventions of ‘traditional Gothic’. Passing through the veil which separates our world from others reveals, not something sublimely life-affirming, but a condition of utmost terror – a terror which can nonetheless be beautiful in its own way.[[46]](#footnote-46) Theodore Roszak (1933 – 2011) traces similar routes for wider cultural movements such as Romanticism, all ending in assimilation into a culture which has had to adapt to the revolutionary ‘counter-culture’ of a younger generation.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Writers active more recently, among them Salman Rushdie (b. 1946) and Ben Okri (b.1959), have adopted techniques often collectively described as ‘magic realism’ to enable them to weave substantial elements of the supernatural into their works.[[48]](#footnote-48) Tzventan Todorov (b. 1939), defends aspects of description by genre and the description of generic tropes, whilst allowing that generic boundaries are almost infinitely permeable.[[49]](#footnote-49) Thus, I will take care when using any terms to make reference to descriptive definitions where useful, such terms should be understood operationally where that produces better ‘flow’ to the argument.

1.1 **Solidity and Supernatural Places in Pre-Gothic Literature**

The critic and author S. T. Joshi (b. 1958) remarks that categorising the genre he describes as ‘supernatural horror’ is ‘vexed’ by seeming to be primarily defined by emotion, rather than by plot, scenario or setting.[[50]](#footnote-50) As mentioned in the previous section, there is a legitimate argument to be had in determining the scope of the ‘supernatural’; in the milieu of Shakespeare, it is clear that ghosts, for example, were to be considered as an irruption of the non-natural into the natural order of things, but it is equally clear that large elements of what we would now describe as ‘the occult’ were considered at the time to be ‘mainstream knowledge’.[[51]](#footnote-51) Modern scientific opinion has only comparatively recently edged astrology, for example, out of the mainstream and into the realm of the ‘supernatural’.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Going further back in time exacerbates these problems. André Leroi-Gorhan writes of prehistoric cave-paintings, seemingly depicting ritualised hunting scenes.[[53]](#footnote-53) He writes:

…we can view the whole of Paleolithic art as the expression of ideas concerning the natural and the supranatural….(the two may have been one in Paleolithic thought)… Taken as symbols of sexual union and death, the spear and the wound would then be integrated into a cycle of life’s renewal….man /horse / spear *and* woman / bison / wound. [[54]](#footnote-54)

Already, we see a notion of flesh or skin as a barrier, and the wound as a way of moving from one metaphysical state to another.[[55]](#footnote-55) Georges Bataille’s (1897 – 1962) ‘*une dechirure’*, and the relevance this has for the notion that the metaphysical boundaries between realities in horror fiction is mirrored in the physical boundary of the skin, is explored in greater depth in section 1.3.3 below. Bataille quotes William Golding, giving us the point of view of a character who stabs her lover during a sex act:

…[she]…felt skin resist, then puncture, then give way, into a separate substance from the flesh…[[56]](#footnote-56)

Bataille points out that this inner / outer dichotomy allows that the puncturing takes us not merely to different aspects of a singular state but into different states altogether. [[57]](#footnote-57) In the quoted case, this state is orgasmic, mingling sex and death, the sacred and the profane, into an ‘elevated state’.[[58]](#footnote-58) Here again, we must consider that the most telling and disturbing tropes of the modern story of supernatural threat suggest that we must consider that the sublime will turn out to be inimical, that on the other side of the barrier is something so inexpressibly alien that it can have neither empathy nor sympathy with the bewildered creatures that might blunder through at the thinnest parts.

The Babylonian story of Gilgamesh is full of monsters and strange happenings but with the mixture of folklore, mythology, religion and pure story-telling in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* it is very difficult to indicate definitively which parts should be viewed as representing the ‘supernatural’ and which as being ‘natural’, and impossible to determine definitively which parts a contemporary audience would have viewed as fact, fiction or pure fantasy.[[59]](#footnote-59) Even so, when Gilgamesh addresses the dying Enkidu, he speaks of visiting ‘those places beneath the earth reserved for the dead’. Such areas are removed from the ‘every-day’ world, certainly, but not of a different *substance*, being places where the dead reside, psychologically intact.[[60]](#footnote-60) With the manifold monsters and horrors of Greek myth, we are perhaps on only marginally firmer ground concerning possible levels of then-current interpretation, having a greater quantity and quality of contemporary comment.[[61]](#footnote-61) However, an element to note in both *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and in (probably) later narrative accounts such as *The* *Odyssey* and *The* *Iliad*, or the still later *Aeneid* of Virgil, is that whilst large parts of the ‘action’ are placed in ‘other’ lands, these are not qualitatively different to the lands of origin.[[62]](#footnote-62) The critic and author John Gaskin has pointed out that:

‘…although the [ancient] world had many unknown areas and uncertain edges…the world, nature, was seen as one system of existence. It was not seen as a natural world plus an un-, sub- or supernatural world existing in a different way along side of or ‘beyond’ the natural world.’[[63]](#footnote-63)

Very early in the history of literature, it becomes a common trope for characters to find themselves in just such one of Gaskin’s strange places; another part of the world which compared with the protagonists ‘normal’ environment is different and mysterious.[[64]](#footnote-64) This location is often threatening or violent, sometimes sexually enticing, very often a liminal space ‘on the threshold’ between one state and another, ‘muddling’ typographies.[[65]](#footnote-65) A modern audience would have little hesitation in identifying many of these places as being transitional in the sense of ‘not-ordinary’, but depicted as real and solid; far-removed from ‘home’, certainly, but not of another order of reality.[[66]](#footnote-66) When protagonists go to these places they may be existentially threatened from without, but there is no real sense of any threat of being disintegrated from within – spiritually, the protagonists maintain integrity, *psyche* and *soma* remaining distinct.[[67]](#footnote-67) Odysseus finds himself on a voyage which sees him finding the portal to the land of Hades, resisting the call of sirens along the way.[[68]](#footnote-68) As already noted, even the dead in Hades maintain psychological integrity.[[69]](#footnote-69) However, this interplay of the natural and the supernatural in the medium of the sensual is not the *raison d’etre,* nor even the centrepiece*,* of these ancient tales.[[70]](#footnote-70) The characters may be drawn from religious myth and local folklore, but the settings seem simultaneously both realistic (the result of knowledge gained through widening trade patterns, and the travellers’ stories which returned along those routes, perhaps) but also thrillingly *different*.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Virgil (70 – 19 BCE) relates a story of Roman propaganda which includes, *inter alia,* descent into the underworld – ‘…a deep cave…’, and encounters with personified horrors in that awful place: Fear and Famine reside there, as do Want, Death, War and even Death’s little brother, Sleep. Again, the settings encountered are fantastical, but the settings themselves are not intrinsically *different* from ‘reality’, nor are these settings themselves active ‘players’ – they are simply (suitably grim) places where the action is set. There is no consistent sense that there is a *metaphysical* difference between the ‘ordinary’ world of the Greek city-states or the lands comprising the Roman Empire and the borderlands beyond and underworlds beneath. [[72]](#footnote-72) The characters and heroes who venture to these far-away places retain their physical and moral integrity – there is no corresponding diminution in their ‘personhood’ as they move from the ‘centre’ to the ‘edge’.[[73]](#footnote-73) When this is contrasted with the isolating effects of moving ‘from the centre’ in much later works, from *Dracula* to *The Shining*, it is clear that there has been a major shift in psychological perspective. [[74]](#footnote-74)

Dante (1265 – 1321) introduces a readership to a topography of Hell in his *Inferno*, in which various sins can be seen as ‘distorted expressions of love’.[[75]](#footnote-75) Dante makes perhaps the first move in a number of general trends which will be of interest in this thesis: the region of Hell itself plays a role analogous to character; and the sinners are systematically stripped of elements of personhood (turned into trees in the wood of suicides, for example).[[76]](#footnote-76)

Later writers including the playwrights up to and after the Renaissance, such as Shakespeare – and perhaps more pertinently, Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593) in drama such as *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1589 - 1593) – also incorporated ‘blasted heaths’, ‘gloomy castles’ and similar locations in their works.[[77]](#footnote-77) These natural features established a reality the modern reader would unhesitatingly describe as ‘Gothic’ with all the ‘forbidden allure’ of Kate Brown’s previously mentioned ‘ruin porn’.[[78]](#footnote-78) The stories, however great the supernatural content, did not concern themselves with the supernatural as a central theme, or even as an important trope. Instead, these landscapes were ‘merely’ setting the scenes for the disquieting horrors presaged by, but not caused by, the supernatural: grotesque landscapes helping to signal the ‘unusual’ nature of the apparitions, indicative of the ‘imbalances’ referred to above, rather than mechanisms for rebalancing.[[79]](#footnote-79) It is important to note that some scholars have seen in the Elizabethan era the first indications of a ‘folk psychology’ which allows and explains discrepancies between inner beliefs and outer behaviours.[[80]](#footnote-80) This marks an important development for the argument of this thesis, namely that *demarcations* between the outer and inner worlds were developing, in both the popular imagination and in literature, even if at this stage the boundaries remained relatively clear.

**1.2 The Literary Gothic: Origins and Flowering**

Robin Sowerby writes: ‘It is well known that the use of the term “Gothic” to describe the literary phenomenon that began in the later eighteenth century has little, if anything, to do with the people from whom the term is derived.’[[81]](#footnote-81) The Visigoths rebelled against Rome, eventually defeating the imperial armies at the Battle of Adrianople in 378 C. E. and then allegedly sacked Rome itself in 410, led by Alaric.[[82]](#footnote-82) The Visigoths were perceived by various near-contemporary and later chroniclers to be important players in the collapse of the Roman Empire and thus occupy central roles in the mythologizing of that defining historical process.[[83]](#footnote-83) They are the ‘Dionysian’ barbarians who destroyed the ‘Apollonian’ order of the Roman Empire.[[84]](#footnote-84)

As Wolfram writes, from a strictly historical perspective: ‘…they [*the Goths*] dissolved at their downfall into a myth accessible to everyone…’[[85]](#footnote-85) With the advent of the Renaissance in the mid-fourteenth century ‘…self-conscious concern about the rival merits of old and new became a dominant theme…’[[86]](#footnote-86) Thus it will be apparent that term ‘Gothic’ has had a long history with widely differing interpretations.[[87]](#footnote-87) Indeed, it vacillated in meaning between having negative and positive connotations more than once.[[88]](#footnote-88) With the advent of the Romantic movement, ‘the Gothic’ gained particular favour. [[89]](#footnote-89) Notably, it is during this period that a recognisable process of ‘psychologisation’ seems to have some recognisable if still distant roots.[[90]](#footnote-90) It is the time, in T. S. Eliot’s (1888 – 1956) famous judgement, of the ‘dissociation of sensibility’.[[91]](#footnote-91)

Romanticism promised a momentous change in perceptions.[[92]](#footnote-92) On the European continent, in times fraught with revolutionary fervour, the notion of a Gothic ancestry was seized upon to support all manner of positions, sometimes utterly contradictory, but often taking what we might now call anti-establishment views.[[93]](#footnote-93) The historic Gothic is described by Jerrold Hogle as being both ‘…regressive and progressive…’ in nature.[[94]](#footnote-94) Diane Hoeveler develops this theme into a notion of ‘ambivalent secularization’, describing the character of the Gothic being a ‘paradox’ within the ‘invention of the modern individual’ – pointing towards the themes of dissolution of identity I shall explore later and identify as defining a particularly ‘modern horror’ in later sections.[[95]](#footnote-95)

For authors and readers of the 18th century, therefore, describing a story as ‘Gothic’ could be seen as tantamount to signalling a sense of indeterminacy, that there was no definite time nor place intended as setting, for example. That the story happened ‘once upon a time’, in a ‘land far away’ points towards the close kinship that the Gothic has with other fantasies, such as the fairy story.[[96]](#footnote-96) It is perhaps in the fairy story (stories of *the faerie*) that we begin to see a realm demarcated from the realm of ‘mundane’ humanity by a transformative transitionary plane – the notion of the ‘thin place’ beginning to emerge, with the attendant dangers for human interlopers (‘Don’t eat the fairy food! Don’t sleep there! Time progresses differently!’).[[97]](#footnote-97) Rosemary Jackson, in proposing that the Gothic is one of the typologies of fiction considered together as ‘the fantastic’, writes that ‘…the fantastic is a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness…’ holding that ‘…the basic trope of the genre is the oxymoron, a contradiction which is not resolved in synthesis…’[[98]](#footnote-98) Some of these critical interpretations will be further explored in sections below, in particular tracing the notion that stories of the supernatural (as against those which ‘merely’ contain a supernatural element) are often set in ‘thin places’ where the demarcation between planes of existence is breaking down.[[99]](#footnote-99) The ‘thin place’ can thus be seen as the membrane or skin which separates these planes. In ‘thin places’ the fabric of reality is pulled ever tighter, put under increasing strain, until it begins to fragment, or becomes liable to puncture or rupture (Bataille’s *dechirure* as introduced in section 1.1 and explored further below and in section 1.3.2) and what is beneath the skin becomes increasingly tangible.[[100]](#footnote-100) It may be, as in the case of those transgressing into the fairy realm, as discussed above, that the rupture is actually the result of the blundering actions of a person, deliberately or accidently straying. If that ‘thin place’ happens to contain people, then their identity is also reduced to the core or, in the ultimate horror, dissembled completely. This violent movement through from one plane of existence to another is mirrored in the puncturing of our flesh, an assault both physical and psychological – and the end result of such a puncture is annihilation, the final stage of the dissolution of identity.

The origins of the Gothic romance, identified explicitly as such, can be traced a little further back than Horace Walpole’s (1717 – 1797) *The Castle of Otranto*, often regarded as being the first (or at least the first self-identified) Gothic novel.[[101]](#footnote-101) Similar *themes* are to be found in the poetry and drama of the Graveyard School of poetry, which flourished around the middle of the 18th century with a focus upon feelings of melancholia and grief, typically exploring scenarios of ‘…ungoverned passion’ and even unbridled violence, both themes common to the later Gothic form.[[102]](#footnote-102) Thus Gothicism played a part in ‘…recovering and renewing a tradition which valued feelings and sensibility, and which had been all but usurped by the developing dominance of reason…’ [[103]](#footnote-103)

In most of the early Gothic stories, although the supernatural (generally) played an important role, it was not strictly a central role – one can at least imagine the stories progressing in some form without the overtly supernatural element.[[104]](#footnote-104) However, for some later writers, the supernatural itself becomes the central element in the story, subsuming many Gothic tropes and themes within a more narrowly defined sub-genre.[[105]](#footnote-105) Thus the term ‘Gothic’, even at the time of the appearance of Walpole’s novel, was largely ambiguous, but becoming a literary ‘current’ distinct from the (supposedly) ‘realistic’ early novels.[[106]](#footnote-106)

In his seminal work, *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz (1896 – 1982), traces a history for the term ‘Romantic’ and notes that: ‘…like the terms “gothic” and “baroque”, therefore, “romantic” started in bad taste…’[[107]](#footnote-107) As befitting the ambiguous nature of all these topics, Romanticism, according to Praz, paradoxically both brought sexuality to the forefront of literary debate and criticism, but simultaneously subsumed some aspects of sexuality even more thoroughly than had previously been the case. Romantic celebration of ‘…the uncontrolled, the macabre, the terrible, the strange…’ also brought to conscious contemplation predilections which some would find shameful – sexual gratification through acts of conscious sadism, for example.[[108]](#footnote-108) By creating the violent infraction which Georges Bataille calls ‘*une dechirure’* (a tear or wound) ‘…in the side of the world…’, works of the fantastic replace a unity of perspective with polysemy, allowing for the gradual disintegration of psyche.[[109]](#footnote-109) This speaks to ancient and deeply-rooted metaphors – from the ‘wounds’ that we see depicted in the cave-paintings described by André Leroi-Gorhan in the previous section, for example, to the metaphorical injuries which can tear through the thin veils separating the previously mentioned planes of existence, foreshadowed in earlier tales and the folkish fairy tales discussed above. [[110]](#footnote-110)

Whatever the meaning contemporary readers attached to the term *Gothic*, the genre it was used to describe proved popular over the decades following the publication of Walpole’s novel.Using then-recent bibliographical guides in a work published in 2000, Robert Miles carried out a statistical analysis of novel-length works published from 1770 through to the early nineteenth century. [[111]](#footnote-111) The intent was to determine which works might be characterised as *Gothic,* based upon indicators including titles and subtitles, comparisons with other writers described as ‘Gothic’,[[112]](#footnote-112) marketing cues[[113]](#footnote-113) and the comments of contemporary reviewers.[[114]](#footnote-114) Miles suggests that following the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*, there was a ‘slow-burn’ in the production of Gothic novels, with a sharp upturn in 1788.[[115]](#footnote-115) The attraction of the Gothic was not confined to an English, or English-speaking, readership, and there were traditions in continental Europe which can certainly be seen as complementary if not actually precursory.[[116]](#footnote-116) A cursory glance through titles and advertising materials in a twenty-first century supermarket book section yields a good stock of ‘Gothic stories’ as widely defined above.[[117]](#footnote-117)

**1.2.1 Gothic, Neo-Gothic and Beyond**

Unsurprisingly, over the course of two and half centuries the Gothic genre evolved.[[118]](#footnote-118) The critic Julian Wolfreys has remarked that the tropes of the genre have transcended narrow literary boundaries, and that in escaping ‘…from the tomb and the castle, the monastery and the mansion, the gothic arguably becomes more potentially terrifying because of its ability to manifest itself and variations of itself anywhere.’[[119]](#footnote-119) Concurrently, powerful new critical and creative tools – in particular psychoanalysis - developed during the twentieth century and can be turned to the task of further illuminating the notion of ‘the thin place’ as it has appeared in literature of the present day.[[120]](#footnote-120)

In the Gothic tales of the eighteenth century, geographical features and scenery become a more integral part of the works in question and by the time that Bram Stoker (1847 – 1912) published *Dracula* in 1897 the Transylvanian castle of the eponymous count as it appears in the earlier part of the novel becomes implicitly as much a character in the story as the vampire himself.[[121]](#footnote-121) Often in ‘classic’ Gothic fiction the story takes place in distant, marginal, mysterious places – southern Europe being, for a time, a favoured spot.[[122]](#footnote-122) It was only somewhat later that the locale could just as easily be a decaying mansion down the road.[[123]](#footnote-123) Arguably, this proximity (it happened in *my own back-yard*!) makes occurrences of the supernatural more ‘uncanny’.[[124]](#footnote-124) These precise locations had to shift as audiences became more educated, a development within the genre dictated, as much as anything, by reader response.[[125]](#footnote-125) By the ‘second wave of the Gothic’, many readers were already too familiar with Italy or Spain, through education or even first-hand experience, for those areas to hold the level of unfamiliar frisson necessary for a properly Gothic setting.[[126]](#footnote-126)

In the ‘New Gothic’ by comparison, the ubiquity of the weird points perhaps to a modernist sense that there *is* no ‘usual’ and that we are, in fact, currently living in a world which is beyond the boundaries previously skirted in the literature.[[127]](#footnote-127) In short, we are currently (sometimes) inhabiting the (sorts of) worlds imagined by writers of horror and the supernatural.[[128]](#footnote-128) Michel Houellebecq writes that ‘…the evolution of the modern world has made Lovecraftian phobias ever more present, ever more alive.’[[129]](#footnote-129)

In the same way that *places* were liminal or marginal in such stories, ‘classic’ Gothic stories often occur at *times* of transition (between the medieval period and the Renaissance, for example) or somehow bring radically different times together, with anachronisms tacitly unquestioned. John Bowen writes: ‘There is a strong opposition (but also a mysterious affinity) in the Gothic between the very modern and the ancient or archaic, as everything that characters and readers think that they’ve safely left behind comes back with a vengeance.’[[130]](#footnote-130) Again, we should be reminded of Jackson’s ‘oxymoronic’ description of the genres explored in section 1.2 above, and of the Freudian theme of ‘the uncanny’, explored in greater detail in section 1.3.3 below.[[131]](#footnote-131)

So all-encompassing has the concept of the ‘Gothic’ become that it could be argued that every modern tale of the supernatural is by definition automatically ‘Gothic’.[[132]](#footnote-132) Being ‘Gothic’ in this sense does not necessitate inclusion of the supernatural although, the supernatural occurs – or is hinted at – in many ‘Gothic’ tales.[[133]](#footnote-133) The ‘bad place’ has a history in stories predating the emergence of ‘the Gothic’ as a literary trope, with some aspects of these earlier stories foreshadowing the notion of ‘thin-ness’ we are exploring, as discussed in preceding sections.

What we see in stories to the early twentieth century is the gradual positioning of various settings, and various time-periods, as vital parts of stories ‘of the supernatural’. By the time the critically acclaimed authors of the Twentieth century (Jackson, King and Langan for example) were producing their works, haunted *places,* as such,had moved to centre stage, often simultaneously with foregrounding the (often also deeply ambiguous) psychological states of the major characters. Eleanor in *Hill House* is a fantasising neurotic, Jack Torrance in *The Shining* is a dissembling alcoholic, and none of the protagonists of *House of Windows* appear stable (certainly not reliable as narrators, as is made explicit at various points through the story). This was an important development in the creation of a new generation of supernatural tale, where the esoteric *is* the story and the *setting* takes on a character at least as complex as the human (or inhuman) protagonists.[[134]](#footnote-134) Indeed, it is one of the key factors that the settings take on a complexity and density *at the expense* of the human protagonists, with the location itself often gradually diluting (thinning) the life force of the characters, vampire-like, over time.

However, writers such as Shirley Jackson, Stephen King and John Langan had a major practical problem: the advent of the ‘global village’.[[135]](#footnote-135) Given the explosion in the amount of, and ease of access to, information in the latter half of the twentieth century, Gothic settings had to adapt – after all, I could hop on a plane and within a few hours view the Carpathian mountains of Dracula’s Transylvania for myself, and thus reassure myself of their relative normality.Therefore, such locations lost their esoteric allure, became as mundanely *solid* as any other part of the ‘real’ world. In a similar vein, the average reader could be expected to be both more informed about historical times and correspondingly less forgiving of accidental anachronisms.[[136]](#footnote-136) With ever-greater focus needed upon establishing a suitably supernatural setting, more recent authors were in fact *compelled* along a route which ultimately yielded the setting *as* supernatural character. Eventually it became necessary for settings to embody in themselves some threatening, non-human element, something which *cannot* be located easily within accessible time and space, as anything that can be so located is itself ‘dense’, substantially like the mundane reality it is supposed to supplant. These locations then ended up playing something of a dual role: setting a scene on the one hand, suitably dismal enough to excite those essential Romantic sensibilities; but also an active *causal* part of the story. This dual nature itself reflects another common theme of the more recent Gothic: a Jekyll and Hyde type of ‘split personality’. [[137]](#footnote-137) This uncanny schizophrenia becomes particularly relevant as we begin to view ‘setting as character’, and see the ‘thinning’ effect of the supernatural as being an emergent theme in the literature in its own right.[[138]](#footnote-138) With this development there emerged a necessity to find a way of demarcating that part of the setting which was ‘normal’ from that which was ‘abnormal’: a demarcation demonstrated by the notion of ‘density’ as a ‘marker of normality’. This will be examined in more detail in the next chapter, looking in greater detail at some particular works of Shirley Jackson, Stephen King and John Langan.

**1.3 Critical Engagement: Isolation, Dissolution and ‘Thinning’**

In the following sections I will examine the themes of isolation and dissolution (of both the psyche and of the physical form) and the ways in which these became allied with the idea of ‘thin places’. In such ‘thin places’, the boundary between our reality and others (generally inimical to us, or at best wholly indifferent) is transgressed with dire consequences. These themes, and the associated language, become integral to the postmodern tale of the supernatural, pointing towards horrors both explicitly supernatural and expressly interior.

**1.3.1 A Contemporary recipe for the Hobgoblin-Romance**

Clery and Miles point out that although the term ‘Gothic’ was not in regular literary or critical use at the turn of the eighteenth century, a number of descriptive terms for Gothic-like stories had been coined: ‘modern Romance’, ‘the terrible school’, and, a personal favourite, ‘the hobgoblin-romance’.[[139]](#footnote-139)

Ann Radcliffe was the target of accusations that her work was highly formulaic – but similar ‘tropes’ (or clichés, to be less generous) have served authors up to the present day. [[140]](#footnote-140) Many of these ‘ingredients’ are to be found in Stephen King’s *The Shining*, for example, set in the monstrous but majestic Overlook Hotel, replete with long corridors and many doors, behind which lurk the required murdered bodies and a decomposing old woman.[[141]](#footnote-141)

Whilst these ‘recipes’ contains many elements, they do not point us towards strictly thematic similarities – there is no mention of any authorial intent to stir a feeling of dread, for example. [[142]](#footnote-142) Such concerns become much more evident as the genre matures in the mid- to -late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and critics began to examine more explicit thematic considerations.[[143]](#footnote-143) It is also worth noting that although the necessity for suitably Gothic setting is given by the ‘Hobgoblin’ ingredients, there is therein no suggestion that the setting *itself* should be evil - the castle could well be haunted, certainly, but it does not *do* the haunting. The evil, whilst deploying perverse psychology, perhaps with an intent to murder, is yet not constituted by an intent to achieve the dissolution of identity of its victims which we see in later works.

**1.3.2 A Temporal and Definitional Interlude**

After the ‘second wave’ of Gothic literature in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, some critics hold that the genre largely went to ground.[[144]](#footnote-144) It is sometimes considered that this quietus lasted until the ‘horror boom’ of the 1970s and 1980s. [[145]](#footnote-145) Yet as early as 1917, the self-proclaimed ‘Great Beast’ Aleister Crowley (1875 – 1947), himself a promoter of ‘psychologisation’ (in this case, of the occult) wrote the novel *Moonchild*.[[146]](#footnote-146) In March 1923, the venerable US publication *Weird Tales* saw light for the first time. Dion Fortune (Violet Mary Firth 1890 – 1946) published collected short stories about her occult detective Dr Taverner in 1926, and followed this with her novel *The Demon Lover* in 1927. Also in the United Kingdom, Dennis Wheatley (1897 – 1977) published his first ‘occult thriller’ *The Devil Rides Out* in 1934.[[147]](#footnote-147) The 1940s saw Robert Bloch (1917 – 1994) in the US publish his first stories in a still surviving *Weird Tales* and go on later in the decade to publish novels in a variety of genres, including supernatural horror. Similarly, the 1950s saw the supernatural and ‘Gothic’ in general in rude health both in print and in film. Far from going to ground the genre (or genres) seemed to be consolidating a position in literature, another aspect of the process of ‘becoming part of the furniture’, discussed in section 1, above.

However, by the late twentieth century, it was clearly felt by some that the genre (or genres) needed some redefinition, if not rejuvenation, perhaps best begun by hiving off the emergent ‘slasher’ genre from ‘old-fashioned’ horror.[[148]](#footnote-148) The introduction by Chris Morgan (b. 1966) to the collection *Dark Fantasies* speaks for itself: ‘No Slime, No Chain Saws’.[[149]](#footnote-149) Morgan suggests that the time has come for a ‘rebranding’ of the genre, that at least a part of the field (the more *serious side* perhaps being his implication) be re-designated as ‘dark fantasy’, in opposition to the type of story which Lovecraft called ‘…the literature of mere physical pain and the mundanely gruesome.’[[150]](#footnote-150) This aptly describes a sort of ‘slasher’ fiction which need have no supernatural element at all, of course, although frequently disturbing, or even frightening. Nonetheless, such tales do arguably seek to invoke a sense of liminality, by moving protagonists from one type of existence to another, transitioning from living to dead. [[151]](#footnote-151) As ‘slasher’ fiction necessarily involves bodily violation or at least the threat thereof, it satisfies many of the conditions I have been examining which describe ‘density’ as a marker of normality within the genre. To stab or slash a body is to rupture the boundary between inner (flesh) and outer (the external world).[[152]](#footnote-152) This rupture is a physical counterpart of Bataille’s *dechirure*, the former occurring at the ‘thin’ boundary of our flesh, the latter at the ‘weak points’ in reality, with psychological norms and physical laws alike being lost in the chaos ensuing from ‘penetration’.[[153]](#footnote-153) Our skin is thin, and that gives rise to the psychological insight which informs a good deal of the horror fiction we are examining[[154]](#footnote-154). Transgression of the boundary (physical or metaphysical) takes us to a realm of horror (the loss of identity in death, in the one case; the conceptual horror of a plane of existence wholly alien, in the second). Russell Kirk (1918 – 1994) was perhaps one of the first writers in the tradition to explicitly recognise this emerging theme. He placed many of his stories in the fictional Potawottomie County, in turn based upon his real-life home in Mecosta, Michigan, ‘…where the boundary between worlds was as thin as the notoriously poor soil.’[[155]](#footnote-155)

One aspect of these above mentioned works from 1910 to the early 1950s is that they start to bring the supernatural to centre stage, prefiguring the trend of the so-called ‘horror boom’.[[156]](#footnote-156) Arguably, these works in their time also represented less ‘legitimate’ forms of literary production – and perhaps suggest questions about what motivates writers to work in what might be seen as ‘outsider’ genres, although also possibly suggesting that such writing could provide outlet for the voice of ‘the Other’, the genuine ‘Outsider’.[[157]](#footnote-157)

Just as the literature itself was undergoing transformation and diversification, there was a reflection in the expansion of critical apparatus. As has been mentioned above, it is difficult to draw definitive distinctions between the various currents; there is clear overlap between Gothic, Horror, Neo-Gothic and so on. However, there is value in examining some of the positions taken in relevant scholarship, in so far as this reflects the emerging awareness of the differences in the literatures. Neo-Gothic in particular is of interest.

**1.3.3 The Uncanny: Dissolution of Identities**

Dissolution and fragmentation, and the multiple narratives these processes reveal, are important themes of modernist theory.[[158]](#footnote-158) These themes were introduced in section 1.2.1 and will be explored in more detail in the next section, *When Authors Speak*. The literature of the supernatural, increasingly having such themes as central concerns, can thus be argued to have been in the ‘vanguard’ of modernism. In contrast with the operational models of definition given in sections 1.3.1 and 1.3.2, more abstract definitions of associated genres abound, and these often draw upon a recognition of the role played by the ‘uncanny’, adopting notions introduced in the ground-breaking essay by Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939).

Freud wrote that:

‘

There is no doubt that [the uncanny] belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread. It is equally beyond doubt that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so commonly merges with what arouses fear in general.[[159]](#footnote-159)

Freud’s project can therefore be described as being an attempt to distil the ‘uncanny’ from simple fear.[[160]](#footnote-160) In our terms, ‘simple fear’ is perhaps that feeling first elicited by the above-mentioned ‘slasher’ stories. The ‘uncanny’, in Freud’s sense, becomes fully developed in stories which see the threat of the dissolution of identities. Later writers of ‘horror’ have recognised the links between personal identity, the more ‘visceral’ form of fear, and a more ‘metaphysical’ fear – Freud’s ‘uncanny’ seems to coincide with Lovecraft’s consideration, given in section 1.3.2, above, concerning what horror writers should be ‘aiming towards’.[[161]](#footnote-161) Even in a broadly comedic setting – such as the *Addams Family* television series and films – the Gothic elements which are employed must be viewed as *usually* aiming towards being scary or unsettling if the subversive comedy is to be effective. [[162]](#footnote-162) Freud indicates elements which he would consider to be uncanny, but suggests that the unifying concept is that which ‘…goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar…’[[163]](#footnote-163) Freud credits the idea to Ernst Jentsch (1867-1919).[[164]](#footnote-164) In the thin places of the world, a distorting mirror is held to us, reflecting our reality whilst simultaneously distorting it, making it ‘uncanny’.[[165]](#footnote-165) The world beyond that mirror is ultimately disturbing, always disruptive – although not without a dark allure as well. As Lacan would have it, this fiction puts characters, and readers, into a position in which our usual certainties become indeterminate suppositions, resulting in the irreducible anxiety which has become an emergent theme of horror fiction.[[166]](#footnote-166)

Where Freud characteristically departs from his predecessor is in examining a less obvious connotation of the term *unheimlich*, applying it to that which was intended to be hidden coming ‘…into the open.’[[167]](#footnote-167) This should put us in mind of the characteristics of ‘The Gothic’ which Bowen describes in section 1.2.1, above: a disconcerting return to what was once familiar. More shocking still is to find what should be ‘within’ (be that a mental state or good old material blood and guts) – suddenly being found ‘without’. Combining his own etymology with Jentsch’s ‘disorientation’, Freud arrives at a new definition: the uncanny is that feeling engendered by a disorientation *caused* by subversion of the everyday by elements normally submerged or hidden within it. This becomes a key idea when dealing with the ‘haunted place’ – the supernatural is present all along in these benighted areas, waiting only for the (thin) veneer of the rational world to be dissolved, penetrated or simply worn away. These processes constitute the ‘reduction’ of generally ‘dense’ reality into the ‘less dense’ unreal – and mirror primal fears of being flayed, revealing the (unpleasant) essence beneath and simultaneously threatening to annihilate the living being. Bringing this unconscious fear to the fore was a staple of *Grand Guignol*.[[168]](#footnote-168) However recognising the fear as being linked to a wider anxiety concerning erasure of identity and the horror inspired by an acceptance of our ‘consensus-reality’ as being a small island in an ocean of (mostly antagonistic) possibilities was a feature of later writers. This, I argue, has defined an entire current of material, recognisable by reference to ‘density’. This argument will be developed in section 2.2, with particular reference to *The Shining.*

In those ‘other’ places, where the hidden comes to light, our familiar sense of personhood itself can be eroded, the ultimate in indeterminacy or ‘troubling’ as described by Bennett and Royle, below. By the same token, beneath the flesh, is that which, ordinarily, we would fervently wish to remain unseen.[[169]](#footnote-169) Revelation of what lies beneath the flesh is, generally, a decidedly ‘bad thing’ as far as living things are concerned. Another aspect of Freud’s ‘uncanny’ concerns doubles and doppelgängers: clearly, the existence of a double undermines, to some extent, individuality and personhood.[[170]](#footnote-170) In traditional superstition, a doppelgänger seen by family or friends portends illness and disaster; to see one’s own double is a signal of inevitable death.[[171]](#footnote-171) A familiar trope in literary and filmic stories of the supernatural involves reflections, in mirrors or elsewhere.[[172]](#footnote-172)

As mentioned above, Andrew Bennett (b. 1960) and Nicholas Royle (b. 1957) have suggested that *all* literature is in one sense intrinsically uncanny, in that there is always present a sense of disequilibrium which derives from a disturbance of the familiar, found in all story-telling.[[173]](#footnote-173) ‘To try to define the uncanny is immediately to encounter one of its decisive paradoxes, namely that ‘the uncanny’ has to do with a *troubling* of definitions…’[[174]](#footnote-174) In this context, the sense of the uncanny produced by effective literature of this type arises out of the transition between one state and another, exactly where the world of the ordinary gives way to the supernatural in the ‘thin places’ of the putatively ‘real’ world.

**1.3.4 Some authors speak: creative insights**

Writers working broadly within the ‘horror’ genre (remembering that my definition is itself ‘troubled’ and indeterminate) have often written critically about their own tradition, sometimes tracing what they believe to be the major developments on their own work, or seeking to give an historical overview.[[175]](#footnote-175) Some might hold that these genres are peculiarly self-referential, although authors in some relatively closely related genres also engage imaginatively with their own antecedents, and genre themes and tropes.[[176]](#footnote-176) In many cases, these accounts by ‘horror writers’ seek, explicitly or implicitly, to ‘justify’ the genre and the interest shown in these dark themes by writers and readers alike.[[177]](#footnote-177) I will explore some of these accounts in order to illuminate the ways in which notions under discussion in this thesis – the knowing use of the vocabulary of ‘density’ to signify a (possibly very fragile) reality, and the knowing use of notions connected with ‘thin-ness’ to show ways in which characters have their identities eroded (thinned) by exposure to liminal areas, which themselves often display sentience.

In the 1827 article ‘On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition; and Particularly on the Works of Ernest Theodore Hoffmann’, Sir Walter Scott sets out his own thoughts on the inclusion of the supernatural in stories, whilst allowing that it could sometimes lose effect by going *too* far.[[178]](#footnote-178) ‘…The interest which [the supernatural] excites is indeed a powerful spring; but it is one which is peculiarly subject to be exhausted by coarse handling and repeated pressure.’ [[179]](#footnote-179) Finally, Scott decides:

…it is evident that the exhibition of supernatural appearances in fictitious narrative ought to be rare, brief, indistinct, and such as may become a being to us so incomprehensible, and so different from ourselves, of whom we cannot justly conjecture whence he comes, or for what purpose, and of whose attributes we can have no regular or distinct perception.[[180]](#footnote-180)

Sentiments which prefigure comments made by Rosemary Jackson: ‘It is this opening activity which is disturbing, by denying the solidity of what had been taken to be real.’[[181]](#footnote-181) Solid reality is that which grounds us, in the metaphysical sense, and the ‘thin’ places are, by contrast, those that threaten to set us adrift.[[182]](#footnote-182) To be so ‘set adrift’ is, first, a threat to sanity (psychological integrity) and secondly a threat to life (physiological integrity): in both cases, a threat to identity. If we hold that solidity equates with reality, such a denial is tantamount to an admission that on the ‘other side’ of the liminal state through which we transition in tales of the supernatural, all things are possible - a ‘cosmic horror’.[[183]](#footnote-183) We might view this as the quintessentially postmodern splintering of narratives which ‘thins’ the solidity of the real, first causing protagonists to question the external reality and eventually eroding away what had been ‘inner’ certainties as well – the character traits, the particular memories – all the attributes that define personhood.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890 – 1937), was an author largely neglected in his own lifetime although now of considerable international popular and critical interest.[[184]](#footnote-184) He wrote about the appeal of the ‘macabre’ tale:

There is here involved a psychological pattern or tradition as real and as deeply grounded in mental experience as any other pattern or tradition of mankind; coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it…a part of our innermost biological heritage…[[185]](#footnote-185)

Kirby McCauley (1941 - 2014), an editor and anthologist, believed that ‘…a tale of horror is always about a breaking down…things coming apart, or slipping out of control…’[[186]](#footnote-186) The popularity of such tales is perhaps due to the reassuring nature of reading or watching *somebody else* confront (even overcome) these existential terrors (although such victories are by no means assured, nor complete, nor even particularly common in more recent writings). Lovecraft points us towards places ‘thin’ by virtue of the fact that exploration (physical or academic) takes characters – and readers – perilously close to ‘other’ realms which often leave protagonists in mortal peril and often leave them struggling to maintain psychic integrity.[[187]](#footnote-187)

Ramsey Campbell (b. 1946) writes of ‘…the sort of tale in which the horrors are symbolic and yet convey the sense of dread all good work in the field communicates…’[[188]](#footnote-188) We all share, to some extent or another, a fear of death, and the destruction of our identity is much more threatening even than ‘mere’ physical destruction, as Stephen King notes:

Fear makes us blind, and we touch each fear with all the avid curiosity of self-interest, trying to make a whole out of a hundred parts. We sense the shape. Children grasp it easily, forget, and relearn it as adults. The shape is there, and most of us come to realize what it is sooner or later: it is the shape of a body under a sheet. All our fears add to one great fear, all our fears are part of that great fear - an arm, a leg, a finger, an ear. We're afraid of the body under the sheet. It's our body. And the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths.[[189]](#footnote-189)

If death is seen as the extinction of personhood rather than ‘just’ end of physical existence, it is the ultimate dissolution. In the same way, the ‘bad place’ must surely always have metaphorical or literal murder at its heart, and not simply a site where bad things happen, as discussed in section 1.2.[[190]](#footnote-190) Many stories of the supernatural involve or revolve around ghosts, revenants or similar ‘undead’ entities which (seemingly) survive the death of the physical body with identities relatively unscathed, even if they are left craving something essentially corporeal in recompense (the dead in Homer’s Hades cry out for the flesh of the living to make them ‘whole’ again; the modern zombie craves ‘brains’). [[191]](#footnote-191)

Todorov asserts that ‘…a genre is always defined in relation to the genres adjacent to it…’[[192]](#footnote-192) Tellingly, supernatural entities in literature are often defined by seemingly paradoxical reference to what they are not – as witness the *undead*, the *inhuman*, the *unnatural* and so on – another incidence of recourse to the oxymoron to enable engagement with these tricky conceptual issues, a necessity touched upon in section 1.2, above. Thus the ultimate ‘horror’ may well be the *un-real*, a possibility which is allowed by *provision* of an ingress – the ‘thin places’ of the writers I will examine in the case studies in Chapter 2, and with various *means* of ingress, all of which involve a ‘tearing through’ of a barrier which has been thinned to the texture and thickness of a layer of skin.

Lovecraft, according to Todorov, defined the ‘horror’ genre primarily by the effect it has upon the reader – that effect being of startlement or fright.[[193]](#footnote-193) In fact, Lovecraft writes only that we should *judge* a tale by ‘…the emotional intensity it provokes…’[[194]](#footnote-194) Understanding tales of the supernatural to be a sub-genre within ‘the fantastic’, Todorov goes on to describe a key characteristic of such tales as being ‘…an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated.’[[195]](#footnote-195) If this ambiguity is understood not as a feature of the characters (not characterising them as ‘unreliable narrators’ say) but rather as a feature of the reality itself, we are coming to an understanding of what the ‘thin place’ is, both literally and metaphorically.[[196]](#footnote-196) Roger Caillois (1913 – 1978) expects that of a relevant genre story that there should be ‘…a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible…’[[197]](#footnote-197) Others have suggested that the defining characteristic should be having this disintegration and alienation preceded by, and counterpointed with, normalcy, a structure which sees the uncanny presaged explicitly in the every-day.[[198]](#footnote-198) Thus, the contemporary feelings of alienation which form a part of the postmodern experience take the reader on a different route into ‘the uncanny’.[[199]](#footnote-199)

It seems that we humans crave the reassurance of normality, whilst simultaneously being enticed by the allure of ‘something different’ – as T. S. Eliot noted, we adopt ‘new mythology’ as a way of controlling and coping with the ‘…chaos and futility of modern life…’ Too late, we may realise that the ‘new mythology’ is inimical, built physical and psychological premises destructive to our own.[[200]](#footnote-200) Even so, when the other option is to have no belief at all, even immersion into the mores of the Gothic might seem more comforting.[[201]](#footnote-201) The ‘irruption’ Caillois looks for is at its most unsettling when it steals upon us – the process of ‘thinning’ being gradual. Stephen King (b. 1949) comments on the stylistic devices of Jack Finney (1911 – 1995) in the latter’s seminal work *The Body Snatchers* in which full use is made of the devices of the uncanny device of the doppelganger: ‘…one off-key note, then two, then a ripple, then a run of them. Finally the jagged, discordant music of horror overwhelms the melody entirely…’[[202]](#footnote-202) Such are the steps that lead us inexorably away from mundane reality in the ‘thin place’ where we hear the unnerving (but also often thrilling) dissonance of true horror.[[203]](#footnote-203) Arthur Machen (1863 – 1947) explores this theme in his story ‘The White People’ (written 1899; published 1904), describing the true measure of horror as sin, an unpredictable transgression of the established order of reality:

“And what is sin?” said Cotgrave.  
  
“I think I must reply to your question by another. What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad. And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the pebble that you noticed at night had shot out stony blossoms in the morning? Well, these examples may give you some notion of what sin really is.”[[204]](#footnote-204)

Machen perhaps presents as the best example of an author who presaged Lovecraft’s oxymoronic notion of the ‘unnameable’.[[205]](#footnote-205) Erin Cordery argues that in much of his work Machen situates bodies (and the physical forms of monstrous protagonists) in *negative space*.[[206]](#footnote-206) Thus, the source of Machen’s ‘cosmic horror’ is that the unseen is ultimately unstable – more ‘un’-words to add to the list started at the beginning of this section, more of the stepping stones towards the unnatural ‘thin place’ which will undo our natural world. This very lack of stability in Machen’s conception – which I characterise as ‘thin-ness’- is perhaps the most important characteristic of horror as it appears in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The *Great God Pan* is perhaps Machen's best-known work and, for Cordery, a:

…striking example of the way in which negative space is employed to affect the sublime; likewise, negative space works to reveal the relationship between the liminal and the sublime and offers an aesthetic that produces the most cosmic horror of all: the unknowable and indescribable body. [[207]](#footnote-207)

William Irwin continues in this vein by suggesting that *any* fantasy ‘…is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possible.’[[208]](#footnote-208) Arguably, of course, this ‘grounding’ is needed in all literature, whatever the genre – there needs to be established a background or ‘reality’ upon which the story is enacted.[[209]](#footnote-209) E. M Forster (1879 – 1970), for example, uses this technique in *A Passage to India*, with an opening description of the geography of Chandrapore, where the Ganges ‘…happens not to be holy…’ and there is ‘…nothing extraordinary…’[[210]](#footnote-210) This sense of the uber-ordinary and the every-day is then eventually subverted by the (un-narrated) events in the mysterious Marabar caves.[[211]](#footnote-211) The solidity of reality as experienced by the materialistic colonial ‘rulers’, and, in parallel, by the common experience of the colonised, is reduced to nothing within the caves, the ‘haunted place’ par excellence.[[212]](#footnote-212) The occurrence is so dark and mysterious, that Forster seems to echo the famous last proposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1889 – 1951) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus:*

*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.[[213]](#footnote-213)*

The final stage of the dissolution of identity – where there is nothing left to be said at all.

**1.3.5 The ‘Thin Place’ in the Literary Canon**

A feature shared by many of the apologist essays examined, from those of Walter Scott, through H. P. Lovecraft to Stephen King, is that they are arguing that stories of the supernatural be considered for inclusion within a literary canon.[[214]](#footnote-214) These arguments are important to the current thesis because they illuminate the growing awareness that these stories often captured, or even presaged, disturbing features of the postmodern *Zeitgeist* – indeed, even characterising it, as discussed in section 1.3.4 above.

Lovecraft, writing in penury and obscurity during the 1920s, suspects that he argues in vain: ‘…we have no reason to think that the general position of the spectral in literature will be altered…’[[215]](#footnote-215) Stephen King, writing some sixty years later and from a standpoint of considerable international sales success as well as a measure of ‘critical acceptance’, is characteristically and understandably more robust. [[216]](#footnote-216) ‘Is horror art? ...the work of horror can be nothing else…’; King both asks and answers the question.[[217]](#footnote-217)

Part of the rationale which argues for inclusion of these tales into the literary canon is that they assist the reader in addressing essential, if unappealing, aspects of human nature (King’s notion of ‘rehearsal of our own death’ in the section above, for example).[[218]](#footnote-218) Some such tales, it is argued, aid us in examining aspects of our own personalities – perhaps more primitive aspects of the Freudian *id* – and may even help to integrate splinters of personality into a ‘healthier’ whole. If modern works of horror often concern disintegration of place, time, or of identity, then they will also point the reader towards those parts of character *essential to* personal identity – it is these very aspects which we watch wear away from transparency to destruction in those ‘thin places’.[[219]](#footnote-219) One such essential characteristic must be memory, linking the infant and the old age pensioner as *the same person* in a chain of experience.[[220]](#footnote-220) *In extremis*, what might remain of the essential *me*? Our emotional responses, reply the multifarious voices of our horror stories. As long as there is that sensibility remaining, I am not erased, I endure – I *feel*, therefore I am.[[221]](#footnote-221)

One argument in favour of inclusion of works of the supernatural into ‘the canon’ rests upon an appeal to just such a sense of utility as discussed in the preceding paragraph. [[222]](#footnote-222) This is the notion that such tales can perform some sort of socially or individually useful function, a catharsis or purging, perhaps, or, with slightly greater sophistication, psychic re-integration. [[223]](#footnote-223) In this context, the stories concerning those ‘haunted places’ which break down the psyche of the protagonists, as examined in the next Chapter, might serve as metaphors for processes of ultimate healing (providing that the process does indeed with re-integration, of course, not with annihilation).[[224]](#footnote-224)

Algernon Blackwood saw a less obvious utility in his stories: ‘Great revelations of nature…stir comprehensible, if alarming emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt…’[[225]](#footnote-225) Similar language is also found in mystical religious writing through the ages.[[226]](#footnote-226) Lovecraft understood the deep appeal of this sense of awe in the story of the supernatural – even while his characters are terrified, often to the identity-dissolving point of insanity, by what they experience, they almost always take time to appreciate the scale of the ‘cyclopeian ruins’ or the ‘vistas of deep time’ they have encountered.[[227]](#footnote-227) These realisations of our relative insignificance in the face of historical and cosmological facts make up one part of the ‘cosmic horror’ we find when penetrating the ‘thin places’. Another part of this horror comes with our discoveries about what lies *on the other side* of that thin veil.[[228]](#footnote-228)

Ahab, in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, speaks of:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask![[229]](#footnote-229)

Imagine what we might find if we could ‘punch through’ these thin masks as they present in our version of reality – the face of God? [[230]](#footnote-230) Nothing at all? Or something ghastly and inimical?[[231]](#footnote-231) In any event, something to stir not only our dread but also our sense of wonder.

The second function supposedly provided by the tale of the supernatural is in the provision of a thrill or frisson (arguably necessary for the healthy development of the psyche) created by exposure to the exotic. ‘When to [a] sense of fear and evil…wonder and curiosity is superadded, there is born a composite body of keen emotion and imaginative provocation…’[[232]](#footnote-232) This notion of a crucial ‘re-balancing’ is often seen within novels stories dealing with the supernatural, which by necessity often deal with polarities of good and evil, light and dark, power and helplessness. The ‘occult revival’ of the late nineteenth and twentieth century saw the previously discussed process of ‘psychologisation’ of the occult, often presented as a way of ‘re-integrating’ Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of personality.[[233]](#footnote-233) This process of examination of the nature of mind and the interplay between external and internal realities is a key feature of modernism and is echoed in many of the ‘supernatural’ tales of the early 20th Century.’[[234]](#footnote-234) Consciously or otherwise, these concepts begin to permeate the supernatural fiction of the time, including very notably that created by the occultists themselves. [[235]](#footnote-235) For the current thesis, the importance of this development is that entities which delay or prevent this integration are increasingly implicitly or explicitly centred in thin places, part of processes which eventually erode identity itself.

Esoteric practitioners began to represent the significance of ‘intermediary beings’ (angels, demons and other spirits) as facets of personality that needed to be integrated into a ‘healed’ *Self.* [[236]](#footnote-236) It became clear to those practitioners that it would be possible to draw upon *any* mythic corpus for the necessary entities, even if that tradition was entirely fictional. Thus we can now find invocations to Lovecraft’s Nyarlathotep in the modern magical work *Liber Koth*. [[237]](#footnote-237) Not only are fictional deities invoked but there are also rites in *Liber Koth* designed to ‘channel’ secular demons such as Adolf Hitler (1889 – 1945). [[238]](#footnote-238)

A third purported function of the supernatural story is to help us deal with concept of personal mortality. Here again, we can see a sense in which a further avenue is opened for genre writers because the ‘thin place’, by threatening dissolution of identity, also threatens to undo the effects of any potential small balm to be had from more ‘optimistic’ viewpoints characterised by King as being: ‘…the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths…’[[239]](#footnote-239) Scarborough writing in the early twentieth century in a similar vein suggests that ‘…Man loves the supernatural in literature perhaps because they dignify him by giving his existence a feeling of infinity otherwise denied.’[[240]](#footnote-240) Fritz Leiber (1910 – 1992) presaged King’s thoughts also: ‘ What [is] the whole literature of supernatural horror but an essay to make Death itself exciting – wonder and strangeness to life’s very end?’[[241]](#footnote-241) But there is an even greater mystery at the centre of our existence – a mystery so great, in fact, that we habitually overlook it entirely – namely, how and why we come to exist in the first instance, why there is anything at all, and the nature of the reality in which we find ourselves. It is a mystery from which the story of the supernatural can draw another strand of appeal:

We fall from womb to tomb, from one blackness to another, remembering little of one and knowing nothing of the other…That we may turn the powerful intuition of our imaginations upon them and regard them in this glass of dreams – that we may…place our hands within the hole which opens at the centre of the column of truth…is…magic, isn’t it?[[242]](#footnote-242)

Magic, of course, can be charming, beguiling and delightful – but it can also be terrible, and threaten not just the established world-view, but also the very mental structures of the observers, thus threatening to ‘*un-do’* their very identities.[[243]](#footnote-243) The ‘thin places’ have to be magical (or of a science sufficiently advanced to be indistinguishable from magic). [[244]](#footnote-244) Once again, it is important to remember that despite the fact that, at least for some, such places have an undoubted appeal, the greater horror would be to subvert even that allure, which is what I argue the ‘haunted places’ of the modern age aim to do.

**1.3.6 Reflections of Reality: Violation of Body and Soul**

As indicated in previous sections, Freud’s essay on the uncanny opened up promising avenues of literary creation and analysis, providing fruitful connections across genres and providing mechanisms for interrogating both conscious and unconscious authorial intent.[[245]](#footnote-245) More importantly for the purposes of this thesis, Freud pointed towards a new way for authors to unsettle their readers. The psychoanalytical approach to literary criticism introduced an explicit focus on personal identity, in particular suggesting that this was a much more fluid, impermanent and fragile construct than had previously been widely considered.[[246]](#footnote-246) Stories in which awful things happened to characters were scary enough but stories in which the nature of character itself was dissolved threatened a new and heightened dimension of unsettlement.

Fred Botting states that the defining characteristic of the Gothic is that it ‘…signifies a writing of excess…’ which illuminates the ‘other side’ of prevailing optimistic narratives.[[247]](#footnote-247) The proto-positivism of the eighteenth century Enlightenment is thus reflected in the indeterminacy of early Gothic works. The spirit of nineteenth century scientific positivism is counter-pointed by the darker narratives of those who ‘meddle with nature’ to their cost.[[248]](#footnote-248) The celebration of the ‘triumph’ of capitalism we find amongst some elements of Western society in the late twentieth century is haunted by dystopian social visions and bleak personal experiences very close to the surface in the twenty-first century.[[249]](#footnote-249) However is difficult to posit universal optimism for the majority of those writers working in the nineteenth century.[[250]](#footnote-250) Certainly to hold that the *Zeitgeist* of the era is fundamentally optimistic is still less credible for the twentieth century, or, thus far, for the twenty-first.[[251]](#footnote-251)

Rosemary Jackson explores the theme a little more, pointing out that ‘…from about 1800 onwards, these fantasies produced within the capitalist economy express some of the debilitating psychological effects of inhabiting a materialistic culture. They are particularly violent and horrific.’[[252]](#footnote-252) This is echoed in remarks made concerning the D. H. Lawrence (1885 – 1930) ghost story, ‘The Rocking Horse Winner’ that the house is haunted ‘...not by a ghost but by a chorus of judgemental materialism.’[[253]](#footnote-253) This loss of identity (in a joyless ‘*chorus’* no less) is characterised in a materialistic society by persons becoming categorised primarily as consumers, excluding other characteristics of personality.[[254]](#footnote-254) With this as a very real fear for the modern reader, the ‘thin place’ threatens to facilitate this seemingly ever-growing societal disregard by stripping away all those features of identity which we have traditionally held to be of importance: our integrity, our moral sense, our memories, our place within relationships – all those elements that readers in another age, with varieties of religious belief, would most likely have characterised as ‘soul’.

In a similar vein, Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) examines the link between themes of terror and the language itself as it finds itself used in the twentieth century: he writes of the language of terror being ‘…dedicated to an endless expense, even though it only seeks to achieve a single effect. It drives itself out of any possible resting place…’[[255]](#footnote-255) Glynis Byron in turn advances this analysis one step further, intending:

…to show how the complications of postmodern writing, particularly in the areas of subjectivity and location (the inner and outer worlds) reflect back onto and into the Gothic, how the uncertainties of a world in which narrative is never sure or reliable not only suggests an origin in the Gothic but also resort to Gothic means in the development of texts themselves…[[256]](#footnote-256)

By virtue of being in times defined by indeterminacy we find ourselves living in a world modelled by the Gothic.[[257]](#footnote-257) Such a world is itself ‘thin’, and what lies beneath our seemingly stable world is indifferent towards us, at best – *that* is the root of postmodern horror and it is that theme which is explored further in the works examined in the second chapter.

Echoing this Lovecraftian theme of cosmic indifference, Jackson’s investigation of ‘the fantastic’ arrives at the conclusion that:

Without a cosmology of heaven and hell, the mind faces mere redundancy: the cosmos becomes a space full of menace, increasingly apprehended and internalised as an area of non-meaning.[[258]](#footnote-258)

This unsettling ‘non-meaning’ threatens the foundations of perceived reality and thus automatically of personal identity. And, once expectations of ‘reality’ have been upset, who is to say what will happen next? All bets are off!

Jackson sees works of fantasy, in all its various forms, as being ‘dialogical’, interrogating unitary ways of seeing the world.[[259]](#footnote-259) In particular, she views this as being in contrast to the ‘…narrow monological consciousness...’ of the early novel form.[[260]](#footnote-260) Jean Bellemin-Noel (b. 1931) takes this notion one step further, identifying a rhetoric of the *unsayable* as being one of the defining characteristics of the fantastic (and thus tales of the supernatural): where there is a lack of meaningful signification, there is the tale of the fantastic.[[261]](#footnote-261) This analysis coincides neatly with the preoccupation of much modern ‘horror writing’ – the attempt to describe the indescribable – the ‘nameless things’ of Lovecraft.[[262]](#footnote-262) More than that, Jackson characterises the very language of the fantastic as being one of ‘…semiotic excess, semantic vacuity…’ – possibly a characterisation that the notoriously verbose Lovecraft would recognise and even endorse.[[263]](#footnote-263)

It is also noteworthy that dark fantasy’s close cousin, science fiction, which also saw a remarkable flowering and maturation through the twentieth century, was equally concerned with the discovery (and exploration) of ‘other’ places- both physically distinct places but also other states of mind – ‘conceptual breakthrough.’[[264]](#footnote-264)

This ‘conceptual breakthrough’ comes as a result of finding new knowledge, exploring (literally) new worlds, but also a result of finding new ways of looking at the existent world.

We think we are travelling out there, boldly going to a final frontier; actually we are always returning home, and the final frontiers are those which define our existences (birth, death and the process of conceptualisation in between) rather than any external architecture of the universe.[[265]](#footnote-265)

The horror story also, at its best, offers a promise of ‘transformation’. [[266]](#footnote-266)

Whatever the dread discoveries *en route* when reading horror, and whatever the awful outcomes, there can – and should – also be a ‘sense of wonder’ at the vastly increased scope of our knowledge and experience – to know that death is not ‘the end’, for example, or that there are other worlds than this, that there is more to existence than has been previously suspected. We get a glimpse into worlds of ‘twilight and borderlands’ as our commonly perceived world thins and dissolves.[[267]](#footnote-267) The threat of the ‘thin places’ is that in such places our identities are also extinguished – even as our protagonists begin to see something beyond their previous capabilities, the indifferent (or actively malignant) universe acts to erase *the person* altogether. It is, perhaps, this species of conservatism which marks out a strand of the horror story, just as a spirit of (revolutionary or evolutionary) optimism arguably seems better suited at marking some varieties of science fiction.

**1.4 The Influences of Modernism**

Modernism as a cultural current began as a European and Anglophone movement, or perhaps more accurately a family of movements, originating in painting, sculpture and allied visual arts.[[268]](#footnote-268) These movements are generally regarded as arising from radical and rapid transformations in Western society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[[269]](#footnote-269) The movements echoed a desire for the creation of new forms of art, philosophy, and social organization reflecting the concerns of an emerging industrial world, including features such as rapid urbanization, adoption of new technologies and the changing, mechanised nature of warfare.[[270]](#footnote-270) Artists attempted to depart from traditional forms of art, such traditions often implicitly or explicitly denigrated as being outdated or obsolete. Critics and commentators routinely described modernism in apocalyptic terms as marking a revolutionary break from historical processes.[[271]](#footnote-271) Ezra Pound (1885 – 1972) commanded: ‘Make it New!’[[272]](#footnote-272) Herbert Read (1915–1968), commenting on modernism in art, describes the process as going beyond revolution, becoming ‘…a break-up, a devolution, some would say a dissolution. Its character is catastrophic.’[[273]](#footnote-273) Twenty years later, C. S. Lewis (1898 – 1963) describes the distance between the early nineteenth and early twentieth century writers as being a ‘chasm’ with later writers being…’almost in a new dimension.’[[274]](#footnote-274)

The continuing influence of modernist thought can be seen in the development of abstract and ‘non-realist’ art, the stream-of-consciousness novel, montage photography and cinema, and atonal music, all commonly rejecting the certainty of single narratives in ‘…a rage against prevalent traditions.’[[275]](#footnote-275) A further notable characteristic of modernism is self-consciousness concerning artistic and social traditions, often leading to experimentation with form, along with the use of techniques that drew attention to the processes and materials used in creating works of art. [[276]](#footnote-276) In literature, this also took the form of ‘knowing’ reference to earlier works, re-workings of earlier creations and self-conscious inclusion of the paraphernalia of academia. [[277]](#footnote-277)

It could be argued that modernity, as described above, is ‘at odds’ with the Gothic as depicted previously.[[278]](#footnote-278) However, the tones, tropes, language, and conventions of the Gothic appear with surprising frequency in modernist texts.[[279]](#footnote-279) Norman writes:

The texts discussed…[by Norman]…do not therefore represent works that would be immediately or primarily identified as Gothic, but, instead, these texts contain, to varying degrees, a Gothic shade or atmosphere, rather than overt or overwhelming Gothicness. Thus, though these texts call upon and refer to the language and conventions of the classic Gothic, they also find ways of transforming and adapting them for a new historical era, creating subtler means through which to re-present anxieties.[[280]](#footnote-280)

In some part, the modernist project, in as much as there was ever a single such ‘package’ of aims, could be characterised as an attempt to examine together the ‘exterior’ and the ‘interior’ and describe interactions between the two.[[281]](#footnote-281) This was also one of the methodologies of Freudian analysis, as seen in his theories on subjects as diverse as jokes, trauma, repression and, of course, the uncanny, as explored in section 1.3.3. above. Thus we see:

…the shift away from the exterior spaces and sublime experiences of the traditional Gothic to the interior spaces and uncanny experiences of Gothic Modernism.[[282]](#footnote-282)

The development of ‘stream-of consciousness’ writing, representing the interior, mental world of the protagonist, is widely viewed as a characteristic of literary modernism (certainly in its earlier forms).[[283]](#footnote-283) The technique was utilised in major works such as Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), James Joyce *Ulysses* (1922) and Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* (1915 – 1938).[[284]](#footnote-284) In the literature of the supernatural, this ‘turning inward’ is perhaps prefigured in Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849).[[285]](#footnote-285) It attains fuller and more explicit extent by the latter years of the twentieth century, to the present, as will be further examined in the next Chapter.[[286]](#footnote-286) The influence of modernism in the ‘psychologisation’ of the literature under examination must be acknowledged as a major step in the evolution of the associated genres under examination.

The disbursement of the ‘furniture of the Gothic’ mentioned previously was also surely hastened by the advent of modernism.[[287]](#footnote-287) The denial of a single agreed narrative and the inclusion of ‘private’ narratives as equally descriptive of reality allowed the disquieting nature of some ‘alternate realities’ to impinge upon more ‘ordinary’ narratives. We see this in the work of Shirley Jackson, where very often it is hard to disambiguate the (extreme) emotions of the protagonists in her stories from their (superficially mundane) experiences.[[288]](#footnote-288) We see these modernist trends also in the works of Stephen King, investigated in section 2.2., where the ‘psychological overlay’ sometimes seen as characteristic of American Gothic arises out of the modernist current which treats exterior and interior realities equally, and in parallel.[[289]](#footnote-289)

CHAPTER 2

The Thin Place: Setting as Character in Jackson, King and Langan and the Foregrounding of Density

**2. Defining Elements**

The problems of definition examined above arise again when examining the selection of particular stories to be examined. Are they to be characterised as within the Gothic tradition, within one of the currents of the fantastic – or even stories of the supernatural at all, in the sense given above in section 1 above? [[290]](#footnote-290) Dorothy Scarborough (1878 – 1935), writing in 1917, comments ruefully on both the massive range and sheer quantity of supernatural literature – her bibliography lists over three thousand titles, whilst acknowledging that it does not come near to being exhaustive.[[291]](#footnote-291) I propose that definitional considerations will be assisted by the exploration in greater detail of three works which have, directly or indirectly, influenced my own work, *No Man*: Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, Stephen King’s *The Shining* and John Langan’s *House of Windows*.

The haunted place, whether that is a natural region or a (putatively) human structure, has itself enjoyed considerable attention in recent critical debate.[[292]](#footnote-292) The trope has been characterised in a number of guises – from the relatively simple ‘dark side of domesticity’, through to having ‘…a (Bakhtian) function as a chronotopic spatio-temporal conduit.’[[293]](#footnote-293) That latter jaw-breaker can perhaps be reformulated into something with a greater intuitive and literary resonance – a ‘thin place’. Stephen King is primarily responsible for the widening usage of the phrase itself – as seen within this thesis, he uses the phrase, or cognate phrases, throughout his works and with greater specificity in later works. It is perhaps best summed up by comments from a protagonist in his story ‘Crouch End’:

‘…our whole world, everything we think of as nice and normal and sane, might be like a big leather ball filled with air. Only in some places, the leather’s scuffed almost down to nothing. Places where the barriers are thinner…Crouch End’s one of those thin places…[[294]](#footnote-294)

In different ways, I will argue, the haunted places described in the works of the selected authors can be characterised as such ‘thin places’, this very lack of solidity corroding the identities of the protagonists to produce a very specific frisson of horror specific to the modern age. I will outline some of the major critical positions that have developed around the works of the authors in question in the next section, especially as these relate to their treatment of ‘haunted places’.

There are, then, recurring themes found in the literature of ‘bad places’.[[295]](#footnote-295) Increasingly central to more recent stories of ‘supernatural threat’ are the features of such places, one such being a notion of ‘thin-ness’ which as has been examined in previous sections, particularly in 1.3.4, and to which I will return again in sections 2.3 and subsequently. This develops into an explicit theme of late twentieth and twenty-first century works.[[296]](#footnote-296) This will be further analysed in subsequent sections as a contributory factor to the dissolution of identity which occurs in these ‘thin places’ (and in what lies beyond them). Finally, I will indicate how such themes manifest in parts of my own work, *No Man.*

**2.1 Some more recent critical positions on Shirley Jackson, Stephen King and John Langan**

Both Shirley Jackson and Stephen King have attracted increasing scholarly critical attention in recent years.[[297]](#footnote-297) Both authors now appear in taught courses at (mostly Anglophone) Universities and, in some cases, at high school level.[[298]](#footnote-298) As would be expected, both feature prominently in many courses on literature offered across the world’s academic institutions, especially those with some focus on the Gothic.[[299]](#footnote-299)

Given the growing breadth of the interest in the two aforementioned authors, a number of areas of focus have emerged. Jackson, in using literary devices such as ‘…psychological doubling, disunified subject, unreliable narrators, and incomplete or absurd plots and settings…’ typified a modernist approach which highlighted, for some critics, an attempt to create counter-narratives to the visions of domestic stability promoted by Madison Avenue.[[300]](#footnote-300) Carolyn Siegel writes:

It would have been interesting to see how Jackson's use of fragmented consciousness, heteroglossia, multiple maternal imagoes, and so on, compare to similar motifs in the works of her contemporaries, especially writers she admired like Elizabeth Bowen and Flannery O'Connor, as well as her fellow Marxist, Christina Stead.[[301]](#footnote-301)

The ‘subverted domesticity’ of King would also form a natural focus for critical analysis. [[302]](#footnote-302) In Jackson’s work, female subjugation to the patriarchy can be seen as a primary feature of ‘dysfunctional cultural processes.’[[303]](#footnote-303) Jackson’s women:

…seem especially vulnerable to losing the security of a settled worldview. Their culture provides them with idealistic dream visions of what their lives should be, and they have a peculiar leisure for contemplation and conversation imposed upon them by their dependent roles.[[304]](#footnote-304)

King’s women (and children) are also often subjugated and objectified by malign masculinity and a society which is almost psychotically patriarchal, using physical and societal power to maintain authority. In King’s fictional version of small-town America, these dysfunctional processes have worn against the veneer of suburban normality to reveal something monstrous.[[305]](#footnote-305) Both authors have ‘…[reconfigured]… the tropes and conventions of existing gothic and horror literature in order to skilfully dissect the mores and anxieties of the modern age.’[[306]](#footnote-306) These are often oddly free-floating anxieties, but again, critics have pointed to some themes: the roles played in inter-generational clashes, for example, are a feature in both authors.[[307]](#footnote-307) Perhaps more contentiously, both have attempted world-building over their body of work; Stephen King very overtly, binding his oeuvre together in a way which even involves his fictionalised self; Jackson much more subtly, the argument being that:

…latent meaning-messages can only be retrieved when analysing one particular story through intelligence garnered from other works by the same author. The other texts that make up the totality of Jackson‘s oeuvre hold valuable information in that they serve as sources, or keys, to breaking the dormant codes that ordinarily lie in a Jackson story individually. This means, in other words, that there is a self-contained kind of intertextuality.[[308]](#footnote-308)

This focus on power relationships and upon gender roles widens out into other popular areas of literary, and more generally, cultural studies. To some extent, it could be argued that both authors explore issues around gender by investigating how female characters make their own choices about which aspects of societal ‘gendering’ they will accept.[[309]](#footnote-309) By the same token, both show that there are often steep prices to be paid for deviance, that ‘society’ does not look kindly, nor react mercifully, upon experiencing subversion or threats to power structures.[[310]](#footnote-310)

There is much less scholarly critical work with a focus on the works of John Langan, although he was, until very recently an academic and literary critic himself. One review of some literary criticism can be found in S. T. Joshi, ‘John Langan: Tales from the Heart’.[[311]](#footnote-311) Joshi directs attention to Langan’s recurrent themes of patriarchy, self-reference and the threatening nature of technology beyond human comprehension. Langan’s own thoughts on some of these themes are explored in section 2.4 below.

**2.2 The Coincidence of Geographical and Personal Isolation and the Surrender of Identity in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House***

A seemingly obvious pre-requisite for a story of the supernatural – with or without a ‘bad place’ - would seem to be that the tale must contain some *element* of the supernatural. I would contend that there must essentially be at least some *suggestion* of such an element, even if the presence of the genuinely supernatural is later brought into question or debunked outright.[[312]](#footnote-312) *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, written by Henry James (1843 – 1916) in 1898, although usually characterised as a ghost story, arguably contains only a *suggestion* of the supernatural.[[313]](#footnote-313) The governess, isolated geographically and emotionally, goes through an experience which can be read as either a manifestation of the supernatural or as a mental breakdown - or possibly as a combination of both, a fitting example of horror residing in the ambiguous disintegration of identity.[[314]](#footnote-314) The relationship between external and internal is also reflected in *The Shining* as the weather and the state of the location reflect the deepening psychosis of the father.[[315]](#footnote-315) There is more than a hint that the main narrator of John Langan’s *House of Windows* (a work discussed in section 2.3, below), Veronica Croydon, is a wholly unreliable narrator, even that possibly the story has been created by her as an outlandish cover for the murder of her husband. However, author John Langan certainly intended that the story be read as being initiated by supernatural events and entities.[[316]](#footnote-316) As established in argument above, a sense of ambiguity (as shown through techniques such as ‘unreliable narration’ and ‘the reveal’) is a mainstay of the ‘traditional’ Gothic.[[317]](#footnote-317) However, it has also become a defining trope of the ‘new Gothic’, indeed, of the multiple narratives of postmodernism itself.[[318]](#footnote-318)

Shirley Jackson’s works often engage in dialogic interrogation of the ‘real’, reflecting a turmoil existing at the intersection of the inner, mental world with an exterior world often uncomfortably unsympathetic to the protagonists. In her 1951 novel *Hangsaman*, the father Mr. Waite – described as typically ‘dense’ and ‘unfaded’- is a character ‘properly rooted’ in consensual reality.[[319]](#footnote-319) His daughter Natalie, increasingly struggling to protect her disintegrating identity as the story progresses, we meet ‘…leaning back with her shoulders against the solid intangible of the air, a thin thing…’[[320]](#footnote-320) Thus the ‘real’ world is characterised by density whilst the inner world and Jackson’s fragile female protagonists themselves, are ‘thin’. This dichotomy can manifest in different authors in different ways – by observation of the weather, for example, or by counterpointing the fantastical with an outer world of mundane geographic location.[[321]](#footnote-321) Where these two realms and their conflicting contents abrade one another is where ‘our’ reality becomes ‘thin’, and the loss of the ‘density’ of the real world is what allows the supernatural to manifest, generally to ill effect. Whereas the ‘classic’ ghost story might contain ambiguity (and is even defined by that ambiguity to an extent), Dale Bailey offers that the modern tale of haunted places, whilst exploiting such ambiguity in its early stages, typically definitively resolves matters in favour of a ‘…clearly supernatural solution…’ Brian J. Showers characterises this process as:

…leaving no doubt that some sort of evil and enigmatic force is at work, emanating from the very foundations of the [place]…every manifestation of malevolence is somehow an outgrowth of the house’s intrinsic will.[[322]](#footnote-322)

From the beginning of literature, it has been easier to site the supernatural in some ‘other’, isolated place, not least for purely practical reasons, as explored in section 1.2.1, above. What marks out modern writers, perhaps from Poe onwards, is the realisation that the ‘other’ place, may, in fact, be – almost - right here. [[323]](#footnote-323) The ‘other’ is separated from us by only the thinnest veil and sometimes not separate from us at all.[[324]](#footnote-324) An associated theme suggests that it is the isolation (that is, both the physical and psychological distance from a reality-defining consensus) which *itself* creates the monster.[[325]](#footnote-325) This is certainly suggested in Jackson’s Hill House – ‘…silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.’[[326]](#footnote-326) Jackson’s protagonist Eleanor reflects this isolation as an inner state as she imagines life without the complicating and draining ties of family and society: ‘…I could live there all alone, she thought, slowing the car to look down the winding garden path…’[[327]](#footnote-327)

Scarborough writes that ‘…the relationship between supernatural effect and Gothic architecture, scenery and weather is strongly stressed…’ and goes on to mention the many ‘…ruinous structures…’ in the works of various authors in the ‘first wave’ of Gothic.[[328]](#footnote-328) The point at which the old-fashioned Gothic notion of ‘haunted place’ gives way to the more distinctive and nuanced modern notion of a ‘bad place’ can be pinpointed as originating in the works of Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849), even if the explicit use of the theme postdates the First World War.[[329]](#footnote-329) This usage coincides with a more astute realisation of the psychological import of the thin boundary as analogous to flesh, and the effects of bodily penetration, with all the associated Freudian connotations. [[330]](#footnote-330) The House of Usher takes on a decidedly malevolent character in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, which has the story’s protagonist ruminate:

The condition of sentience had been here…fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones – in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them…above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement.[[331]](#footnote-331)

It is in Poe’s ‘splicing together’ of the ‘furniture of the Gothic’ with the sensibility characteristic of Romanticism that we see the development of a physical and psychological geography which informs our ‘modern’ authors:

…With Poe the gothic turns inward…Roderick Usher’s mind is as much a reflection of his house as his house is a reflection of his mind. When the one fissures, the other fissures also…In such a tale climate, landscape, architecture, genealogy and psychology seem to bleed into one another until it is impossible to distinguish a figure from its metaphors.[[332]](#footnote-332)

There are tales set in the modern era which do not make explicit use of these ‘ruinous structures’ at all, but seek to blend together exterior and interior states to heighten a general sense of unease – and which foreground that unease in domestic settings which subvert the expected sense of security – a ‘home turned against us’.[[333]](#footnote-333) *Rosemary’s Baby* (1964) by Ira Levin (1929 – 2007), tells a story of diabolism set in then-contemporary New York, without recourse to ruined castles.[[334]](#footnote-334) The heroine, Rosemary Woodhouse, comes to feel an awful sense of isolation but there is an ambiguity which should lead the reader to question the reality of what Rosemary believes to be the case.[[335]](#footnote-335) This isolation, as a theme, plays an increasingly central part in the later manifestations of the ‘supernatural tale’, rather than the locations as such. Rosemary ends the novel as a shell of her former self: all prior aspects of her personality and sensibility have been stripped away by her wish to be mother to the creature to which she has given birth, perverting the edifying notion of motherhood into something disturbing and un-natural.[[336]](#footnote-336)

Sometimes, and very effectively, these geographical and personal facets of isolation coincide: as with the character of Eleanor Vance in Shirley Jackson’s (1916 – 1965) *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959).[[337]](#footnote-337) In this story, a group of visitors is ostensibly engaged in research into disturbed sleep, although in fact are unknowingly part of a parapsychological investigation. Eleanor is isolated with fellow ‘experimental subjects’ in Hill House, a Gothic pile *par excellence*. However, as well as sharing the geographical isolation of her fellows, Eleanor is also socially isolated from the other members of the group, unable to own up even to herself the sad situation of her lonely life. In particular, she is ‘…unable to narrate the death of her mother’.[[338]](#footnote-338) When the book was first filmed, (as *The Haunting*, 1963), it is perhaps instructional that scriptwriter Nelson Gidding (1919 – 2004) took the story to be one of Eleanor’s mental breakdown. Only a visit to author Shirley Jackson persuaded Gidding that the events of the tale should indeed be portrayed as genuinely and primarily supernatural.[[339]](#footnote-339)

Dale Bailey makes a case for Shirley Jackson employing ‘…the haunted house as a metaphor for an oppressive patriarchal society…’, referencing Jackson’s autobiographical writing as evidence.[[340]](#footnote-340) As readers, we are certainly led to believe that Jackson’s character Eleanor Vance has internalised the oppression she has suffered to such an extent that she joins the group at Hill House unable to differentiate consistently between fantasy and reality. Eleanor has no children, nor any close family of which to speak, nor any notable accomplishments (to her mind), and no possessions, beyond an ancient car, which, it turns out, is probably not legally hers in any case.[[341]](#footnote-341) As experienced readers and viewers of the horror story, we know all too well that this is a dangerous state of affairs indeed when in a haunted house of the modern literary era, where malign forces will take advantage of such weaknesses. Irving Malin makes an important point about the direction taken by ‘modern American Gothic’, asserting that it is marked by a profound ‘turn inward’, with gothic settings still serving as a battleground for a clash of good and evil, but with this contest now dramatized on a more personal, inward-looking level – I would argue that the horror is residing as much in the dissolution of identity as in ‘external’ shocks.[[342]](#footnote-342) What aids in this characteristic dissolution is, of course, the thin nature of reality in these ‘bad places’.

At first Hill House seems marked by its remarkable solidity: ‘…walls…upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm and doors were sensibly shut…’, but as the small party of experimenters begins to settle in (the group like a dysfunctional modern family, Bailey suggests: and indeed, Eleanor specifically identifies them as a family on their first morning together), things begin to change.[[343]](#footnote-343) Lying in bed on her first morning in the house, the ceiling seems ‘dim’ and ‘remote’ to Eleanor.[[344]](#footnote-344) Members of the party look to ‘dull’ themselves with brandy.[[345]](#footnote-345) As the physical manifestations begin to take an increasingly sinister turn, the rooms range from originally being ‘…thickly dark…’, to their reality being dimmed into faintness by an ascendant power that lay at the heart of the house.[[346]](#footnote-346) One of the party complains of the fixtures and furnishings: ‘…Everything so soft. Everything so padded…’ although admitting that these indistinct objects ‘…reject you at once…’ [[347]](#footnote-347) Eleanor struggles to uncover her identity, to discover the core of her being, but that too has been rendered indeterminate, as much by her own multiple re-narrations of her life as by any external influence. She has spent her whole life up to this point looking after her mother, now dead, but with this burden lifted, Eleanor struggles to find an identity for herself, welcoming the adventure which Hill House promises, and the *definition* which it might thrust upon her. Although Eleanor might welcome release from the servitude of long-term care, such a change in role also threatens to ‘undo’ her, as she has come to define her existence in terms of her role as ‘carer’. Alone of the group, she comes to *welcome* the increasingly close embrace of the house. Finally, Eleanor gives herself over to the house completely; she mocks her fellows for their solidity as she crosses over into the liminal world of Hill House. ‘They are so slow, and so deaf and so *heavy*…’ (original emphasis).[[348]](#footnote-348) Disturbed by Eleanor’s behaviour, the others insist that she leave, even flanking the exit route in a ‘…solid line…’, forming a last redoubt of normality, of solidity, if Eleanor will accept it, a solid arrow of rationality pointing ‘out’ but also ‘back’ to reality[[349]](#footnote-349)

Following Eleanor’s death, the ending of the book reflects its beginning; once again, whatever that walked in Hill House, ‘…walked alone’.[[350]](#footnote-350) Again, a clear indication that, although Eleanor seems to believe that she is ‘giving herself up’ to the house (a spiritual union akin to marriage for the hitherto loveless Eleanor) she is in fact *absorbed* by it – whatever power infests the house has utterly subsumed her identity, and, in the end, Eleanor, even the *shade* of Eleanor, is gone.

There is a thematic resonance in the notion of isolation, of course, but also a practical consideration – if it is easy for the hero or heroine to walk away from their unsettling experiences (and obvious that this is what any rational person would be expected to do), the readers’ suspension of disbelief is tested in those instances where the characters do not simply leave, or seek outside assistance, or in some other way tip the balance back towards perceived reality. However, where we view the isolation as being as much mental alienation as physical distance (as is the case with Eleanor), no such simple escape route is offered. The only available option is having to ‘work through’ the various issues. Jackson’s celebrated short stories often play upon similar themes.[[351]](#footnote-351) In *Hill House* the suggestion is that the ‘thin place’ itself (that is, Hill House) offers an ‘easy solution’ to Eleanor, offering an acceptable and simple unitary release from the manifold complexities of a ‘normal’ personality.[[352]](#footnote-352) So, ruinous structures, impassive and impersonal topography, and inclement weather are all sufficient conditions for our modern tales – but the *necessary* component is isolation, either physical or mental – preferably both. The sense of mental isolation and subsequent disintegration of personhood, is what marks out the distinctively modern from what came before in the tale of the ‘bad place’. Eleanor Vance, separated from the remains of her birth family, then acting to distance herself even from her new, *ersatz* family in Hill House; Rosemary Woodhouse ripped from her familial home and away from her circle of friends in *Rosemary’s Baby*; the Torrance family in *The* Shining isolated by their location, by Jack’s acts of sabotage, and estranged from their own more-or-less dysfunctional birth families. It is notable that in all three cases, one character comes to an accommodation of a sort with the supernatural entity, a trade-off of a more complex (real?) life for a single identity-defining purpose. Eleanor kills herself in the grounds of Hill House by driving her car into a tree, thus binding herself to whatever it is that promises her purpose. In her last moments, there is a chilling moment of lucidity:

In the unending, crashing second before the car hurled into the tree she thought clearly, Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this?

Why don’t they stop me? [[353]](#footnote-353)

Both Jack Torrance and Eleanor Vance, to some extent or another, *voluntarily* give themselves to the evil power in their respective haunted houses. Both are tricked by an evil entity, of course, but both also come to see their identities as being *defined* by the (greater) power they believe that they would serve. In a similar vein, Rosemary Woodhouse in *Rosemary’s Baby*, a work which in tone and style has informed a good deal of what arrived later in the field, eventually decides to fully accept that she is the mother to the demonic child to which she has given birth, swapping her previous existence, as what we might now characterise as a yuppie, by throwing in her lot with her Satanist neighbours.[[354]](#footnote-354) Levin, of courses, places his finger confidently on one ‘real’ factor which might induce someone to abandon their previous character: the sudden onset of the responsibility of parenthood. So, arguably, in her maternity, Rosemary retains some element of her personality, albeit a ‘primitive’ one, which cannot be dissolved in the isolation she has experienced.[[355]](#footnote-355) Here, a subversion of the themes we have examined, but a subversion at an enormous cost, as Rosemary has had to choose to give up everything which would characterise her as a ‘good’ person in order to be a ‘good parent’ to the baby we recognise as being the Antichrist.[[356]](#footnote-356)

Jack Torrance in *The Shining* ends up being virtually extinguished by the Overlook – it has promised him all those ephemeral things which Jack had thought he desired: success, artistic integrity, a sense of stature (if only as a ‘good employee’), even the alcohol he craves emotionally and physiologically – all of which, in different scenes, Jack seems to ‘try out’ in imagination or memory, as defining his identity. The reader wants to tell Jack that he is overlooking (pun intended) the obvious fact that he is sequestered with the family which could, if he would let them, provide that very sense of satisfaction which he seeks. Jack has been duped by the power in the Overlook, but as Danny points out in his final confrontation with whatever has possessed his father’s body:

You’re the hotel. And when you get what you want, you won’t give my daddy anything because you’re selfish. And my daddy knows that…you lying false face.[[357]](#footnote-357)

There is rarely much to be gained in striking a deal with the Devil.

Marcel Brion (1895 – 1984) wrote that ‘the fantastic’ can be regarded as a kind of perception ‘…qui ouvre sur la plus vastes espaces…’ (…which opens onto great spaces).[[358]](#footnote-358) Rosemary Jackson suggests that it is this very process which is the cause of our being disturbed, ‘…by denying the *solidity* of what had been taken to be real...’ (my emphasis).[[359]](#footnote-359) As in sections 1.2 and 1.3.5 above, we are directed to Bataille’s notion of ‘tearing’ and ‘wounding’ – the irruption of the supernatural is a violence upon the ‘body rational’, which threatens everything we hold to be of value in the ‘normal world’, especially our sense of ‘self’.[[360]](#footnote-360) With the ‘inner world’ becoming more real than the external world, characters face Bataille’s ‘…disintegration of the psyche’. [[361]](#footnote-361) The themes of these works draw upon both physical and psychological isolation, and the ways in defects of character can be magnified into chasms when faced with such isolation. We then discover what might rush in to fill those spaces.

**2.3 Isolation and the Reduction of Identity in *The Shining***

*The Shining* was Stephen King’s third published novel and featured the Torrance family, down on their luck thanks to a series of incidents caused by the father (Jack) having a barely controlled anger, fuelled by alcoholism, with roots in a violent childhood. Jack and Wendy have a young son, Danny, who possesses an awesome psychic ability, of which they have only the very vaguest awareness.[[362]](#footnote-362) Jack takes on the role of winter caretaker for a resort hotel in the Rockies, the ill-omened Overlook. In short order, the malignant force which resides in (or actually *is*) the hotel recognises a hugely effective potential power source in Danny. If Danny dies inside the hotel the dark power therein will absorb his energies (and the essence of Danny himself we must believe). There are shades – in the sense of manifestations we would usually characterise as ghosts - aplenty in the hotel, but with the possible exception of Grady (who seems to be the ghost of a previous caretaker and who appears to be semi-autonomous – although there is every possibility that this is a trick) they all appear to be fundamentally projections of the force within the hotel itself.[[363]](#footnote-363) There is a growing body of critical work on King, and on *The Shining* (both King’s book and the subsequent film).[[364]](#footnote-364)

When Stanley Kubrick (1928 – 1999) came to create his celebrated film version of *The Shining*, he (like Nelson Gidding with *Hill House*) was not wholly comfortable with the overtly supernatural elements of the story, so that these ended up within the film as slightly unsatisfactory ‘add-ons’ to a story of mainly psychological disintegration.[[365]](#footnote-365) James Berardinelli notes: ‘…King would have us believe that the hotel is haunted. Kubrick is less definitive in the interpretations he offers.’[[366]](#footnote-366) Presumably, we are asked to believe that the film offers us an interpretation of Jack’s developing psychosis through Danny’s eyes.[[367]](#footnote-367) Berardinelli therefore decides that the *film* fails as a ghost story, but succeeds as a study of "…madness and the unreliable narrator.” [[368]](#footnote-368) Gothic, perhaps, but not an example of the supernaturalism I am seeking. [[369]](#footnote-369)

However, both novel and film put the Overlook hotel, where the family are over-wintering in a last-ditch attempt at financial and familial stability, centre stage thematically. [[370]](#footnote-370) In both novel and cinematic versions we see in an important scene, the last of the guests leave, and the hotel become empty (of people), the human element reducing, the consensus reality thinning out. For the remaining protagonists there is danger as a result of their isolation, a clear foreshadowing that their identities are about to be compromised, even to the extent of Bataille’s ‘disintegration of the psyche’ mentioned in the previous section.[[371]](#footnote-371) Even as the family watch the last of the seasonal staff and visitors leave the hotel within the novel, Jack feels ‘…as if his life force had dwindled to a mere spark and the hotel and grounds had suddenly doubled in size.’[[372]](#footnote-372) Then the snows come, cutting the hotel off physically – so that the family is ‘…locked in by the soft, implacable snow…’ – a state halfway between ‘solidity’ and the ‘void’.[[373]](#footnote-373) Finally, increasingly deranged, Jack destroys all the electronic communications so that the isolation of the family becomes total. ‘Danny didn’t know the word *isolation*, but if someone had explained it to him he would have seized upon it…’[[374]](#footnote-374) Danny, anchored to a wider reality through his psychic ability, has a better chance to resist the ‘thinning’ which is diminishing his father and striking justifiable fear into his mother as she struggles to maintain a sense of her own reality.[[375]](#footnote-375)

As the enormous weight of the human consensus of ‘reality’ is lifted from the Torrances by their physical and psychological isolation, the darker veracity of the Overlook begins to assume an increasingly greater solidity for Jack and his family. On the closing day and before he leaves the hotel for the winter, Dick Hallorann, the Overlook hotel’s psychic chef, tells young Danny Torrance to be careful as he overwinters, but that whilst recognising the malignant nature of the hotel and its occasional visions, Dick didn’t ‘…think it was a bad thing that could *hurt* anybody… [it was] just like pictures in a book.’[[376]](#footnote-376) But for Danny the pictures become *tangible* and assume solidity, with the reality of the Overlook, powered by Danny’s superhuman psychic abilities, becoming reality for the Torrances. [[377]](#footnote-377) King has also written a fantasy cycle, *The Dark Tower*.[[378]](#footnote-378) In this cycle, King makes very explicit the concept of an area where our reality is particularly precarious – designating such places as ‘thinnies’.[[379]](#footnote-379) In these ‘thinnies’, where different planes of existence overlap, the interior and exterior co-exist uneasily, the psychological and the physiological sooner-or-later colliding with – generally - calamitous results. The Overlook may be just such a place, although not specifically identified as such within the novel. As *The Shining* concludes, Jack stands listening as around him:

…he could hear the Overlook Hotel coming to life…it wasn’t a perception of sight or sound, although it was very near to those things, separated from those senses by the filmiest of perceptual curtains…[[380]](#footnote-380)

The tropes revealed in *The Shining* are, unsurprisingly, those revealed in much literature of the supernatural, and in particular concerning haunted *places.*[[381]](#footnote-381)Dale Bailey lists some ‘conventions’:[[382]](#footnote-382)

A house…

* With an unsavory history
* With an aristocratic name
* Disturbed by supernatural events usually unrelated to human ghosts[[383]](#footnote-383)

Bailey’s final point is an interesting one, marking a conscious departure from previous ideas, discussed in sections 1.1 and 1.2 above, that these ‘bad places’ are *simply* such places where ghosts and ghouls have congregated, for whatever reason. *These* places are bad by virtue of some intrinsic feature or character – making them agencies in their own rights.[[384]](#footnote-384) This tendency we have seen start to develop in later works, as described in section 1.3.4, above. *These* places exemplify that ‘thin skin’ which Bataille identifies as being liable to ‘rupture’ – an appropriately organic metaphor for the haunted place itself viewed as a conscious organism.[[385]](#footnote-385) Various critics have pointed towards the focus of King and his contemporaries – in particular authors such as Poppy Z. Brite (b. 1967) and Clive Barker (b. 1952) – on the surface of the body and the ‘visuality’ of blood.[[386]](#footnote-386) Integral to this conception are two further notions, both related in different ways to my thesis: firstly the idea that since Poe, at least, the ‘thin place’ has become a character in its own right in tales of the supernatural – moreover, a character which seeks to perpetuate its own survival, which often necessitates the destruction of other agents.[[387]](#footnote-387) Worse still, the human protagonists are *within* the bad place – small wonder that the larger entity might seek to assimilate, incorporate or expel them – *the people* have become the invasive parasites, of a sort which normally excites disgust in us.[[388]](#footnote-388) Secondly, the bad place, *qua* organism, makes us reflect upon those physical barriers which separate us from others.[[389]](#footnote-389) Our own flesh being the most sanguine of these, metaphorically and literally, as the piercing of that particular veil is potentially the most transformative of acts. Such penetrative injury is, by its very nature, transgressive, and the result is damaging physically, but more importantly for the current thesis, also mentally.[[390]](#footnote-390) The penetrative act threatens to undo the constructs of personhood, a physical trauma which impacts upon the psychological, as discussed in section 1.3.6. It threatens the ultimate horror of non-existence. In literary terms, it illuminates the fears implicit in accepting multiple narratives of reality, as discussed in section 1.3.5, and in the next section with respect to John Langan’s work – what if there is no ‘one true reality’ to ‘call our own’?

Bailey goes on to describe as an essential plot point in the ‘haunted place’ that there is ‘…an escalating series of supernatural events which isolates the family physically and psychologically.’ The important role played by such escalations *qua* plot devices was explored in more detail in section 1.3.4, above. Such ‘haunted’ places may *attract* unpleasant characters, but they are not exactly *haunted* by them. [[391]](#footnote-391) Rather, the location itself seems to hold them, like flies on fly-paper.[[392]](#footnote-392)

The Overlook Hotel acts, either directly, or through the rapidly degenerating Jack, to further the family’s isolation – entities such as the Overlook are weak in the presence of the sheer mass of humanity, their horrors mostly little more than Hallorann’s ‘pictures in a book’. That ‘mass of humanity’ creates a Gestalt-reality in which excludes the supernatural (Bataille’s ‘…weight of a prosaic reality’[[393]](#footnote-393)). Such entities work most effectively on those who are isolated, alone both geographically and psychologically. Communication with the outside world in *The Shining* is first made difficult by the falling snow, then rendered impossible by Jack’s destruction of the radio equipment after hearing his abusive, deceased father’s voice issuing from the machine: ‘His father’s voice, going up higher and higher, becoming something maddening, not human at all…coming dead at him out of the radio…’[[394]](#footnote-394) The small family group becomes psychologically disparate – there is mistrust from the beginning between Jack and wife Wendy, the former with suspicions that Wendy is disappointed in him, the latter harbouring the habitual mistrust of one who has lived with an alcoholic.[[395]](#footnote-395) Later on, both are caused to experience a deeper mutual mistrust when they accuse one another of causing the injuries Danny incurs when he meets with ‘…the lady in the bath-tub…’ in Room 217.[[396]](#footnote-396) This encounter comes at a time when Wendy has no reason to suspect that there is anyone – or anything – else in the hotel with them. For Jack, however, his outrage at Wendy is something of a pretence as he already suspects the presence of other entities. In short measure, he too meets the entity in room 217.

The physical isolation also plays an important role as plot device, of course, as the natural question the reader might ask is: “Why don’t they just leave?”[[397]](#footnote-397) At first, Jack manages to persuade his family (starting with himself), that to walk away from his post would mean financial ruin, and that in any case there are few immediate options open to them as both he and Wendy are estranged from their respective families. [[398]](#footnote-398) ’Finally, we see the Overlook itself directly persuading Jack that it is his duty and his destiny to stay at the hotel – providing only that he undertakes to murder his son, fulfilling the evil entity’s ultimate aim:

“You would bring us your son?”

“Yes! Yes!”[[399]](#footnote-399)

By that act, Jack has (seemingly willingly) sacrificed one of the defining parts of his personality, that of being the loving (and beloved) father.[[400]](#footnote-400) By that weakness, Jack is emptying *his* personality out, becoming, as it were, an increasingly empty, less *dense*, therefore less real, vessel. Once his personality is sufficiently reduced, the Overlook will act directly to possess him.[[401]](#footnote-401) Thus, if we see the story as, in part, contrasting and conflating Jack’s internal states with the realities inhabited by (or created by) the Overlook, the original emptying of the Hotel mirrors the subsequent hollowing out of Jack’s personality under the relentless pressure exerted by that evil entity.

Hallorann, eventually summoned by Danny’s psychic ‘shout’, makes his way from Florida back to the Overlook: ‘As each mile turned over, his terror grew – as if the place had a poisonous atmosphere that thickened as you neared it…’[[402]](#footnote-402) Reality is thick, substantial, that place where identity generally inheres – but now, we find ourselves in a state of transition, from the rational world Hallorann is leaving – the Florida sunshine, where aeroplanes fly, where there is a sensible economic infrastructure of hire cars and holiday resorts – into an altogether inhuman place, operating on principles inscrutable to humanity. Thus, the alien world of the Overlook is what is now attaining density. This notion is further explored in the next section, John Langan using the idea self-consciously as a motif in its own right. As Danny flees from his father, the motif is rehearsed again, the anthropocentric world giving way to somewhere else, as Danny works again and again to keep back the tides of the Overlook’s warped reality:

[Danny] seemed to be bursting through some thin placental womb from sleep…lying near him in a bloody heap were the bodies of two men…they faded before his gaze like an old photograph and were gone…A decayed woman…pranced out… ‘False face!!’ he hissed ‘Not real!’ She drew back from him in alarm, and in the act of drawing back she faded and was gone.[[403]](#footnote-403)

**2.4 Reality as Density, and the Ambiguity of Identity in John Langan’s *House of Windows[[404]](#footnote-404)***

In John Langan’s novel *House of Windows* (2009) the notion of density which I have been tracing is treated of more overtly.[[405]](#footnote-405) ‘Density’ and ‘thin-ness’ here emerge as verifiable genre trends.

In this story, a graduate student, Veronica, marries a significantly older professor, Roger Croydon (a specialist on the works of Dickens), and moves into his home.[[406]](#footnote-406) The professor’s grown-up son objects to the marriage, and during the course of a vicious row, the father pronounces what amounts to a curse upon his son. When this young man, Ted, is subsequently killed fighting in Afghanistan, where he is serving with the US military, the house seems to become haunted, although the focus of the manifestations is in fact with Veronica. This meshes with a post-colonial reading of the work, taking as a theme putative US adventurism in the Middle East as evidenced in the Gulf Wars of 1990 – 1991 and 2003, and the conflict in Afghanistan following the events of September 11 2001.

Veronica subsequently learns that her husband, during a time in jail, had entered into a Faustian bargain with a supernatural entity, which feeds on the physical agonies of the son and the mental anguish of the father. The exact nature of the entity is never fully revealed, nor is the link with Roger fully explained, but the reader is led to believe that the materials Roger is gathering in his study form a point of contact for the creature, from which and through which it is able to increasingly manipulate events in the ‘real world’. Langan has examined his story:

When I set out to write the novel, I was thinking that Belvedere House would be a haunted house in the tradition of Hill House, the Overlook, etc., which is to say, a place where bad things had happened in the past and continued in some sense to happen, manifesting in a variety of spectral forms…Belvedere House was going to be my take on the haunted house…By including the information of Thomas Belvedere’s involvement with the house, I wanted to suggest the way in which the house might have become, if you will, activated (an explanation which has very deliberate links back to Fritz Leiber’s great novel, *Our Lady of Darkness*, from which I think I got the idea that the things we build might become imbued with a peculiar life of their own, and that they might attract or manifest otherworldly creatures).  I like the idea of the house as an unstable entity, both a nest for the power with which Roger makes his pact while in the jail and a conjunction of a variety of locations, some of them manifestations of the psyche and history of its inhabitants (especially Roger), others avenues to strange and dreadful places. [[407]](#footnote-407)

In Langan’s novel, we are invited, through the narration of the wife, Veronica Croydon, to experience the house in question becoming less solid, less dense, almost ‘faded’ – with what lies beneath being inimical to the human inhabitants, of course. The first inkling we have of this takes place fairly early in the story, as Veronica makes her way up towards Ted’s old rooms:

…I was acutely aware of places where the house felt – less dense, as if, were I to smash a hammer through them, I would find, not wood and wire, pipes, but darkness, an opening into I couldn’t say what.[[408]](#footnote-408)

Later, the house is itself threatening to tear ‘…open to another space…’, an injury which will bring harm to all the characters.[[409]](#footnote-409) A little later still, the narrator describes a manifestation in terms of frames of a film when a movie reel gets jammed, the celluloid melting in the heat of the projector lamp: the corruption of reality is likened to the burning of film stock ‘You can see its center bubbling and thinning, as if someone were holding a match beneath it…’[[410]](#footnote-410) The reader is reminded that this is an explanation of her husband’s eventual disappearance, so that all these events are tainted by Veronica’s unreliable narration – indeed, there is a suspicion that this is may be an elaborate tale told to cover up Roger’s murder at Veronica’s hand.[[411]](#footnote-411) Destruction of ‘evidence’ is an ongoing theme, marking the indeterminate nature of the story and fuelling the complex of reader-interpretations. This interplay between cinematic image and the written forms is particularly intense in the tale of horror: probably more than in any other genre, visual and literary media collide in a thoroughly knowing ‘mash-up’. [[412]](#footnote-412) Various critics have pointed towards the tendency in modern horror to describe voids, through which we can fall (and through which something from the other side may also manifest): Julia Kristeva defines the void as ‘…the unthinkable of metaphysics.’[[413]](#footnote-413) David Peak develops this theme, arguing that, in horror, this void manifests within the protagonists – a lack which eats away at the integrity of personality, and ultimately at personal identity:

Consider it something of a cosmic infection: the unthinkable beyond (the outer) manifesting itself as a hole within (the inner) that serves to degenerate the whole – a corrupting blackness occluded by or swallowed within further blackness.[[414]](#footnote-414)

Reza Negarestani characterises these degenerating voids as ‘( )holes’ – which is another productive way to think about the ‘darkness’ Veronica feels is behind the façade of the Belvedere house, or manifestations that threaten Danny in *The Shining*. In both cases these are injuries to the fabric of reality which ultimately, allow ingress to something from that place of darkness in Langan’s novel, and in King’s *The Shining*, undo Jack’s personality and allow the awful entity which is the Overlook to crawl into the emptied shell of Jack’s physical body.[[415]](#footnote-415) Langan, writing about his works, suggests:

‘If…horror addresses itself to those moments when…the epistemological ground on which we think we stand so firmly crumbles beneath us, then one way in which we might experience this is in our relationship to others, especially those to whom we’re closest…’[[416]](#footnote-416)

Thus a crucial part of personal identity is removed. In the Overlook Hotel, disturbing images are attended first by sounds and then by physical manifestations. Wendy Torrance hears the hotel’s empty elevator start into action and discovers confetti from a party that finished decades before, the past bleeding perceptibly into the present.[[417]](#footnote-417) In the Croydon household in *House of Windows*, Veronica also begins to feel that her version of the reality of her house is wearing away to a thin-ness, being replaced by another, more malevolent and less immediately visible actuality:

The places where I had felt the house thinning were now thinned…What was more, the rest of the house was also thinning…I must have felt the house disappearing around me.[[418]](#footnote-418)

Thus we see the gradual fading of the solidity of ‘consensus reality’ – Langan’s web of relationships which not only bind us societally but also provide the ‘solid’ context for our identities. Many different elements help to ‘anchor’ our identities in place: the lure of the material, of the tactile and the physical – all manifestations of density. And the antithesis of this familiar density? The intangible.[[419]](#footnote-419) Identities disappear along with the human-defined realities, in the ultimate ‘ontological / epistemological horror’; metaphysically, the disappearance of the self; physically, the rupturing of the skin, the letting of blood; spiritually, the prospect of nothingness, or worse, a horror that continues even after physical death.[[420]](#footnote-420)

Langan has also explored this notion further in his 2016 novel, *The Fisherman*, in which a dreadful place can be reached by those willing to travel literally and metaphorically through ‘thin places’, described explicitly in the transitions within the story.[[421]](#footnote-421)

In another celebrated ‘haunted house’ story that foreshadows some of these themes, Robert Marasco (1936 – 1998) in *Burnt Offerings*, describes a similar process of ‘erasure’, moving from solidity, through thin-ness to another, inhuman, reality, in which the protagonists identities are stripped away: in death, in psychic disintegration, or worst of all, by being subsumed in the supernatural ‘other’. When the Rolfe family arrive for their first look at their vacation home, they make their way through the solid real world:

The woods rose in the back of them, solidly…heavy with the smell of weeds baking…[to]…the house….grey and massive…[[422]](#footnote-422)

But upon taking up the house, a month later, the interior has already begun to fade, become thin: the lights are ‘cloudy’, the rugs and carpets ‘faded and frayed’, the walls ‘colorless’.[[423]](#footnote-423) The twist in this tale is that as the family degenerates, the house starts to return itself to prior glories. Each step in the process of decrepitude and decay for the family is matched by a corresponding improvement in the house. Eventually, the family is subsumed entirely into the house, the characters ‘thinned’ to nothing, the house restored to full three-dimensional solidity. It has been temporarily rejuvenated, vampire-like, by the life-force of the hapless visitors. In the same way, the family unit of the Croydons in *House of Windows*, reduced finally to the lone (isolated) Veronica, has experienced the reduction (the ‘thinning out’) first of Ted, cursed by his father, then of Roger himself, victim to the very entity which he conjured to ‘deal with’ his son. The inhabitants of the Croydon house have been – at best - utterly transformed, at worst, annihilated. Ted is dead, but very possibly continues to be abused by the demonic figure his father conjured. Roger himself is subsumed, physically and physiologically, into Langan’s ‘darkness’, a void into which he steps with seeming forethought towards the end of the book. Veronica carries with her the self-abnegating ambiguity of her experiences within the family, but the house itself, like Marasco’s, returns to being a splendid and desirable object.[[424]](#footnote-424) We know that there is a price to be paid for this alchemy, a return to the societally desired status quo, a price that Dale Bailey describes as a ‘…critique of the American Dream’.[[425]](#footnote-425) Bailey is thinking of the ‘economic horror story’, where the price to be paid is worse than loss of money and status, literally worse than death – the dissolution of identity which arises as the ultimate result of valuing things over people.[[426]](#footnote-426)

CHAPTER 3

Life, Death and After-Life in the World’s ‘Thin Places’: The Themes, Tropes and Motifs in *No Man*

**3.1 The Settings and Characters in *No Man***

The story in my novel *No Man* concerns a small group of people drawn together to overwinter on a remote Scottish island, partly as caretakers, partly to record impact of pollutants on the ecology of the island.[[427]](#footnote-427) Their personal reasons for being there are various: a woman, like Eleanor Vance in Jackson’s *Hill House*, and named Eleanor in recognition of the importance of that character, arrives having come, partly, in search of some sort of defining adventure given her previously sheltered life.[[428]](#footnote-428) A second character, Alex, is a student drawn to the island by the promise of the solitude he needs to finish off working on a mathematical theory which he believes will enhance pattern-recognition in machine intelligences. Alex is on an autistic spectrum, specifically at that end sometimes loosely defined as ‘high-functioning’.[[429]](#footnote-429) Alex is also synesthetic, seeing mathematical notions and other abstract entities as colours and patterns.[[430]](#footnote-430) A third character, Mike, is trying to put behind him the death of a child he has caused.[[431]](#footnote-431) There was a practical question which needed to be answered in the course of completing the novel: whilst it is comparatively easy to see why these characters might have found various (and varyingly good) reasons for travelling to, and over-wintering on, the island, what was it that the island’s owner would see in this collection of characters to make it worthwhile *having* them overwinter? At first sight, these characters by-and-large lacked the sorts of practical skills which would be needed. Therefore, a secondary rationale was introduced, which saw the characters undertaking ecological surveys and studies. This also suggested good reasons for them being out and about on the island, providing a cogent reason for Eleanor to be out on the beaches alone, for example. In this way the necessities of plot dynamics also feed into the characterisations and backstory.

As a Gothic setting, one can hardly improve upon the islands of the Inner Hebrides: rugged, depopulated, remote (by British standards), physically cut-off by the sea (doubly isolated by frequent poor weather, triply so by the difficulties in communication which still beset these islands), now viewed as a Celtic ‘fringe’ but heir to the romance of the Celtic peoples. As discussed in section 1.2.1 above, there is an established history of European Gothic favouring settings in this ‘mystic’ Celtic fringe, a handily nearby ‘other’ (certainly for audiences in the United Kingdom) upon which to project fears.[[432]](#footnote-432) The list of genre features goes on.[[433]](#footnote-433) An island serves the dual purpose of thematic isolation but also being physically isolated – it provides a ready answer for the natural question of why those suffering from the intrusion of the supernatural tied to a location do not simply walk away.[[434]](#footnote-434) However useful as a plot device, the isolation also serves an important thematic role – it removes from the protagonists in the story the ‘weight’ of the rest of humanity, takes them to a place ‘thin’ in terms of human presence, thin in terms of human flesh itself (as against the huge mass of the island, for example). In this isolated place, the consensus which reflects an agreed-upon reality is unstable.[[435]](#footnote-435) The whole community consists in only a handful of people, and as the story progresses, it becomes clear that in their tiny community and given the protagonists’ varying mental states, there is no ‘normal’ consensus. [[436]](#footnote-436) That stretches the thin fabric of reality to the point where the ‘holes’ of Negarestani gape into Bataille’s ‘puncture wounds’. For my thesis, it is enough to point out that this points towards a sense of ‘knowing’ self-reference within the literature, self-reference which itself almost certainly plays upon a ‘folk memory’ of the disquieting stories of ‘disappearances’ found in folklore.[[437]](#footnote-437) David Peak describes three types of ‘holes’ which occur in these narratives of horror:

1) Holes that open up and either free something from a prison or let in something…2) holes that act as a transformative passage, warping whatever enters into a new and often unrecognisable form; and 3) holes in which the space within is endless and trapping (labyrinths) [[438]](#footnote-438)

In *The Shining*, the psychic hole left by Jack’s personal disintegration allows the Overlook in to possess his body; there is a similar transformation also in *The House of Windows,* the melding of the familiar and the unfamiliar which characterises Freud’s uncanny, seeming to replace the father in the story with his dead son. In *The Haunting*, Eleanor finds herself trapped within a new reality, that of the haunted house itself. In *No Man*, what lurks beneath or erupts out of these supernatural puncture wounds is no less destructive for all of my protagonists, in ways which mirror, and acknowledge, these tropes, ending in death by catastrophic physical ‘puncturing’ in the case of the student Alex.[[439]](#footnote-439) For the other two main (human) characters, one death is self-inflicted – an ultimate act of self-negation, which reflects the view Eleanor has taken of her own worthlessness (a view encouraged, we must believe, by the evil entity which is, or resides in, the island itself). The remaining protagonist is left at the end of the story contemplating self-destruction as perhaps the better of the two options with which he is left.[[440]](#footnote-440)

By the present time, the notion of ‘thin places’ has permeated the oeuvre of supernatural literature to the extent that an allusion can be made without the necessity to explain exactly *what the thin place is* – at least where the readership can be assumed to be experienced in the genre.[[441]](#footnote-441) Thus, to take an example from a recent work:

Grandpa says Uncanny Valley is a thin place…I guess thin places is more fun than most. They keep us on are (*sic*) toes.[[442]](#footnote-442)

The island in *No Man* is just such a ‘thin place’, where the ‘normal’ world is vulnerable to disintegration, or to ingress by another, inimical cosmos with its own, different reality.[[443]](#footnote-443) What inhabits such a lawless place could be anything – in the case of *No Man*, it is where the vengeful dead might wait, impatiently, to be summoned for a chance to redress wrongs.

**3.2 Autobiographical Origins of No Man**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was teaching at St. Dunstan’s College, in the London borough of Lewisham.[[444]](#footnote-444) I was invited by a colleague to accompany groups of school children to the island of R’ua Fiola in the Inner Hebrides.[[445]](#footnote-445) The sole habitation was an activity centre for teenagers and young adults, owned and run by a company known as Wild Island Exploration.[[446]](#footnote-446) These courses were similar to the traditional ‘Outward Bound’ but taking place on an otherwise uninhabited private island. [[447]](#footnote-447) The courses involved instruction in developing abilities in activities such as climbing, abseiling and kayaking but with an added element of training in surviving ‘off the land’.[[448]](#footnote-448) For those who had attended the centre over several years, there was the opportunity to go to smaller, completely uninhabited islands nearby or to remote places on other islands in order to put into practice these survival skills. The ultimate aim was to adventure solo (although under careful and sustained remote supervision) and live off the land for a period of a few days. It was an exceptional opportunity for young people to push the limits of their experience in an extraordinary environment. In 1989, I was offered the chance to work on the island for part of a summer, helping with the preparation of food and acting as ‘kitchen porter’, a (junior) member of a catering team of two.

During my time working for Wild Island Exploration, I began to gain some appreciation of what it meant to live on an otherwise uninhabited island. Use of electricity had to be rationed, as it was all drawn from local sources (a petrol generator and a small wind turbine, such as commonly used on yachts, which was primarily used to power the television, switched on for the weather forecast and daily news bulletins). There were two small boats, one used mostly to transport personnel, the other mainly for ferrying supplies from the mainland to the island. The only form of electronic communication at that time was a radio set – I believe that it is still the case that the mobile phone network is non-existent or at least largely unreliable in this area.[[449]](#footnote-449) The radio – which ran off large batteries - was switched on at pre-determined intervals to ‘check in’ with the coastguard, although during the summer season it was also used at times to chat with the crews of local fishing boats. These local fishermen also kept an informal eye on the groups which were out exploring, and, in particular the young people undertaking the aforementioned ‘survival’ experiences overnight.

I also discovered that there were working parties of various constituencies which would over-winter on the island in order to carry out repairs and undertake necessary basic maintenance. The winter weather was described as being extreme, often leading to these winter inhabitants being cut off from physical contact with mainland for many days at a time. The store room was sizeable, and could hold very considerable stocks of dry and canned goods – in the summer season, it would easily hold sufficient stock for fifty or so persons for two weeks, so I imagined that it would be possible to stock enough basic provisions for a small number of ‘over-winterers’ for a significant period of time, certainly enough to see them through periods during which the island would be effectively out of contact with the mainland.

The possibilities such a setting afforded for a story of the supernatural were not lost on me. The island promised a genuine sense of isolation, providing a ready answer to the most obvious question directed at characters in a haunted setting, a question explored to a degree in earlier sections of this essay – *why don’t they just leave?* [[450]](#footnote-450) The notion of a small ‘over-winter’ party also presented an opportunity to throw more Gothic elements into the mix: violent storms and extremes of weather on the one hand, and an eclectic mix of characters, all with their own reasons for seeking solitude. As with *The Shining,* an increasingly bleak environment is mirrored in the disintegrating psyches of the protagonists. Most importantly, the setting suggested a *mechanism* for the irruption of the supernatural. If our reality can be viewed as a shared consensus of the mass of humanity, then a tiny group of persons with their own distinctive, idiosyncratic, views and life histories could, in a small and well-defined area – such as on an otherwise uninhabited island – start to subvert the ‘normal’ consensus-reality and allow something else to begin to enter into its place. By virtue of its isolation, and because humanity has left so ephemeral a mark upon it, the island of my story is one of those ‘thin places’ examined above, and the disturbed psyches of certain individuals might, I surmised, after a while begin to wear a hole right through to ‘somewhere else’. In this case, I want to suggest that the ‘thin place’ allows (or invites) a vengeful spirit to ‘cross over’. In the process, the identities of my protagonists would be dissolved as they entered into this ‘alternate reality’.

Using the elements discussed above I started to develop stories in a number of notebooks from 2000 onwards. At first I envisaged a party of psychic investigators, as in Hill House, but the composition of an overwintering party seemed to allow for a greater diversity of character types. This also allowed for a greater degree of character development, important in demonstrating the dissolution of identity described above as being an integral part of the 'modern' tale of horror.

There is a strong tradition of oral story-telling in the Scottish islands.[[451]](#footnote-451) A good many such tales include elements of the supernatural – involving selkies, for example.[[452]](#footnote-452) I wanted to reflect some element of this tradition in my story as well, hence the appearance of the two local fishermen telling their stories of dread concerning the island.

Like many readers of supernatural literature I have an interest in the history and theory of the genre (discussed in greater detail in the next section); thus, the incorporation of various tropes and traditions which would immediately signal this interest and act as meta-textual signposts to some of the historical and theoretical issues discussed in the first sections of this thesis.[[453]](#footnote-453) I wanted these to be there to be shared with an informed readership (and this notion of ‘knowing’ inter-textuality is itself a worthy tradition within the genre).[[454]](#footnote-454) At the same time, *No Man* is intended to be a story which can be read and appreciated on the ‘surface level’ as a ghost story.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS: Placing *No Man* within a Tradition

**4.1 Placing *No Man* within a tradition**

The tradition within which *No Man* falls is that of the supernatural tale of a ‘bad place’, as described in the first two chapters. My story was conceived to consciously reflect, to varying extents, the works by Jackson, King and Langan, in which, to different degrees, the ‘bad place’ itself plays an active role in the story, beyond being just picturesque setting. Thus *No Man* is intended to be in the overtly ‘Gothic’ tradition, rather than the ‘New Gothic’.[[455]](#footnote-455) The writing of the story provokes a question concerning what new perspective any story of the supernatural is able to bring, given the long history of the genre(s) and the (arguably) relatively small number of available themes. I believe that the answer to that question lies in the body of this essay: that there is a space within the tradition for stories which explore the ways in which personal identity can be constituted and the ways in which identities are tested in the ‘bad places’ of the supernatural literary world.

Jack Sullivan divided the tale of the supernatural into two distinct subgenres, which he characterised as being the antiquarian and the visionary.[[456]](#footnote-456) The former, according to Elizabeth Hand: ‘…typified by a certain emotional detachment….a dry, precise evocation of a world that is recognizably our own, inhabited by sensible characters – male Edwardian antiquaries whose stolidity borders on dullness.’[[457]](#footnote-457) The latter characterisation, however, ‘the visionary’ expresses more metaphysical concerns of identity, exploring an often inimical universe and the place of humanity within such a universe.[[458]](#footnote-458) W. Scott Poole has characterised the period following the First World War as being the time during which the second of these subgenres gained prominence – I suggest that it is from this point that ‘thin-ness’, whilst already developing, becomes a defining notion in the literature under examination.[[459]](#footnote-459) In this concluding section, I will point towards some areas in which I believe both of these traditions are evident within *No Man*, and the way in which my story aims to develop ‘ontological horror’ as outlined in my Introduction, above.[[460]](#footnote-460)

As previously investigated, the literature of the supernatural, like its close cousins in the fields of science fiction and fantasy, has a strongly self-referential tradition.[[461]](#footnote-461) Keen readers are quite likely, it seems, to be aware of the history and ‘canon’ of their preferred genre - more so, perhaps, than keen readers in most other genres.[[462]](#footnote-462) Arguably, such readers are also likely to be more technically aware concerning the tropes and themes, which, possibly unusually in genre fiction, function as the most important signifiers of genre-type:

Unlike the western or gangster film, where there are a few fairly hard and fast rules in terms of the environment that the action might take place in, or indeed the nature of the characters that are ranged against one another, the horror genre can encompass an extraordinarily wide range of environments, characters, threats and subtexts. This is perhaps one of the major reasons that the horror film has remained popular – or has been able to reinvent itself when its popularity seemed to be on the wane.[[463]](#footnote-463)

Aficionados of the genre seem to recognise a great number of very flexible codes and conventions which indicate to an audience the type of reading or viewing experience they are about to receive.[[464]](#footnote-464) In writing the story of *No Man*, I was keen to make both implicit and explicit reference to some of these conventions, and to mirror ways in which those conventions have appeared as tropes in works canonical in the genre.[[465]](#footnote-465) Partly this was out of a desire to signify the place I believe the story has within the tradition – very much in the ‘classic’ Gothic tradition, but simultaneously interrogating the issues of identity, boundary, transgression and the ramifications of ‘thin-ness’ which I explore in this essay, notions which are very explicitly modernist. Very early in the story the island setting is described. It is a typically Gothic location, detailing remoteness, implying a certain harshness. I also wanted to suggest a variety of sentience to the setting, in the style of Jackson’s *Hill House*, which begins:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within;…whatever walked there, walked alone.[[466]](#footnote-466)

In *No Man*, the opening pages also hint at more than metaphorical life:

From a distance, the island appeared to be heaving itself out of the waters, the rock striated into strips of light and shadow that made the surfaces seem to writhe.[[467]](#footnote-467)

The rock, densest of materials, is described in contradictory terms as ‘writhing’, introducing a theme of density set against insubstantiality, or the ‘instability’ which is seen in the ‘soft’ snow which eventually imprisons the family in *The Shining*. Langan suggests he was aiming towards a similar effect in writing *House of Windows*.[[468]](#footnote-468) Another characteristic feature of many effective genre stories, is an early sense of physical alienation – often, some sort of journey into remoteness in order to reach the ‘bad place’ is necessary, both in plot and in underlying theme.[[469]](#footnote-469) The classic example of this comes in *Dracula*, where Bram Stoker (1847 – 1912) has his young hero Jonathan Harker travel into the wilderness of the Carpathian mountains in Transylvania – first by train, a relatively luxurious (and at the time self-consciously *modern* process), but then by increasingly primitive (and then ‘uncanny’) means.[[470]](#footnote-470) Harker leaves behind his rational, culturally English roots in a series of stages which also act to turn back the clock from the enlightened nineteenth century into the dark ages, stripping away Harker’s comfortable societal conventions (and thus the ‘consensual reality’ I have been describing as representing the ‘thick’ nature of reality).[[471]](#footnote-471) By way of explanation, Harker writes in his journal: ‘…the further east you go, the less punctual are the trains.’[[472]](#footnote-472) In *No Man*, I wanted to reflect Harker’s journey, and subsequent ‘Gothic’ voyages, and the trope represented, in the journeys the protagonists take to the island: ‘…as the train rushed northwards he began to feel a little of what weighed upon him carried away in the slipstream…’[[473]](#footnote-473) For Harker geographical remoteness is tied to a sense that orderliness is reducing as he moves (a reduction which appeals to his ‘English’ sense of adventure – reflecting a late Victorian colonializing ethos) and I wanted to echo this as well.[[474]](#footnote-474) Eventually, at the end point of Harker’s journey, rationality is wholly overturned in the castle of Dracula, and eventually for Mike in *No Man*, the reality of the island supersedes the reality he has ‘left behind’.[[475]](#footnote-475) Botting recognises that this sense of ‘transgression’ also applies to Dracula himself …’Dracula’s crossing of boundaries is relentless…In crossing the border between East and West, he undoes cultural distinctions between civilisation and barbarity, reason and irrationality, home and abroad.’[[476]](#footnote-476) Here again, one of the keys to Gothicism in general; subversion of the Apollonian ‘Augustan ideal’ investigated in sections 1.2 and 1.3.5 by ‘celebration’ of its Dionysian / Gothic obverse. The film critic Mark Kermode has commented:

One of the key tropes of horror movies is a juxtaposition of two worlds – the old and the new, light and dark, good and bad - and a journey from one to the other. We usually start in the familiar world – the world in which we can easily believe. Then the monster – the threat, the menace, the terror – must come from beyond, either from an older world unnaturally preserved, a frightening future rushing to get here early, the depths of a broken mind, or beyond a veil separating this world from another dimension.[[477]](#footnote-477)

In the same way, travelling to the island in *No Man* is a process of ‘leaving behind’ the rational world of general consensus. A 2020 draft has this made explicit in a conversation between Mike and Alex:

Mike looked out of the window, thoughtfully. “Well, I wonder if all of reality isn’t a sort of construct, something that gets agreed on, somehow, by all the millions of us living together. Where huge crowds congregate over time, there is a sort of ‘consensus'. Here, the reality is much….I don’t know how to describe it….?”

“Thinner,” Alex finished for him. “Everything feels brittle here, like a painting overlaid on another, slowly peeling away until we can see the picture underneath.”

“And we came along with all our worries, our histories…our little *secrets*. Then somehow it uses our weaknesses...our past…”[[478]](#footnote-478)

The characters who travel to the island are already, in different ways, in need of ‘psychic integration’ – and it is, of course, mortally dangerous to be in a thin place when you are yourself ‘thin’:

An uncomfortable image floated into [Alex’s] normally well-ordered mind: that the earth and stones he stood upon were paper-thin illusion and he would step through that surface as easily as breaking through a skim of ice on a fathoms-deep lake.[[479]](#footnote-479)

All the characters in *No Man* have their journeys to the island described – Mike’s journey in particular is designed to reflect Harker’s.[[480]](#footnote-480) In *The Shining,* the Torrance family make a similar journey out of the ‘normal; also going up into mountains, in their case the Rockies – and their transport also becomes increasingly unreliable, their ageing vehicle ever-closer to breaking-down.[[481]](#footnote-481) The contemporary devices which characterize the modern ‘ease of life’ become increasingly less reliable, less ‘comfortable or comforting’. Eleanor’s (physical and emotional) journey to Hill House is described in Jackson’s story (like the Torrances, Eleanor also doubts the efficacy of her car). In Langan’s book, although the physical journey made by the main protagonist is not great, there is still a considerable psychological distance covered in coming to the Belvedere House and undertaking a ‘new life’ there.[[482]](#footnote-482)

‘The journey’ often comes naturally at the beginning of the supernatural tale – indeed, locating the journey towards the beginning of the narrative possibly marks it out in certain respects from some other forms of fantasy, in which ‘the journey’ is often a more integral part of the story itself.[[483]](#footnote-483) I follow the journeys that my characters make to the island closely in order to establish both the important aspects of their personalities, and also to show a distancing – that in coming to ‘the wilderness’ where the reality-defining consensus of the great mass of humanity (in the ’more civilized world’) is weakened.[[484]](#footnote-484) This technique also sets up some of the ‘binary oppositions’ which, as previously explored, help to define this deeply ambiguous genre: civilized/wild; near/remote; societal/individual; familiar/unfamiliar.[[485]](#footnote-485) Another part of the descriptive constitution of the island in the story was adapted from a dream, recorded in my personal dream journal:

I am…exploring a series of peat bogs when I come across a wall. I climb over and into a walled pond area…the water splashes as a large creature comes to the surface…I attempt…to escape but [a creature] bites my hand and holds me.[[486]](#footnote-486)

The landscape in this dream, although reflecting the reality I had experienced in the Hebrides, also had an ‘abstract’ texture which I wished to reproduce as faithfully as possible in the novel.[[487]](#footnote-487) It feels instructional that my dream sequence included the ‘puncturing’ I reference in theoretical terms utilizing terms from Bataille and Negarastrani.[[488]](#footnote-488) In the dream, I am bitten, I am unable to escape –a feeling I was keen to capture for the book as it restated themes of penetration and feelings of helplessness which go to the heart of many horror stories – characters captured by psychological boundaries in *Hill House*, historical boundaries in *House of Windows*, or within physical barriers, by the snow in *The Shining* or the sea in *No Man*. At first there may be a sense that there is nothing in these ‘bad places’ that can actually hurt the protagonists - as described previously, Hallorann the Overlook’s chef tells Danny Torrance what he might see in the Overlook are just like‘…pictures in a book.’[[489]](#footnote-489) One of the geographical features which features largely in *No Man* is the cave system into which Mike is drawn, from which the final haunt emerges and where Eleanor is tricked into killing herself.[[490]](#footnote-490) The connection of what is underground with the supernatural in general and the Gothic and other literary traditions in particular has been discussed previously, especially in relation to the indeterminacy to be found in the Marabar caves; in *No Man*, it can also be taken as the physical manifestation of the ‘thin-ness’ which permeates the island.[[491]](#footnote-491) The cave becomes the locus through which the island is able to enact its evil, through which the undead pass, a literal and metaphoric ‘hole’.[[492]](#footnote-492) Again, this negation can speak, but only in untruths:

*Come on in*, the gaping mouth invited, *nothing to hurt you in here*…[[493]](#footnote-493)

As the characters in *No Man* gather together to become the sole inhabitants of the island as the seasonal business is shut down, an alternateconsensual reality gradually becomes established.[[494]](#footnote-494) Mike is an older man who seems to take charge, and as such presents as an archetypal ‘father figure’.[[495]](#footnote-495) However, his patriarchy is undermined by his attempt to escape from a tragic incident in the past; Eleanor is a female character modelled upon Eleanor Vance in *Hill House*, a woman adrift socially and psychologically, without close ties; finally, Alex is the youngest of the group, child-like metaphorically in terms of the ‘family’ in which he finds himself, but also in fact by virtue of a condition akin to autism, which makes it difficult for him to relate to others – but which also possibly distances Alex from the ‘usual’ consensual reality.[[496]](#footnote-496) All three, for various reasons, have a more tenuous hold on this consensual reality than might be ‘normal: Mike and Eleanor both desire that reality is *different*, Alex perceives his experiences as idiosyncratically different in any case.[[497]](#footnote-497) These particular traits of identity become virtually the sole remaining characteristics of the characters as their travails unfold, a dissolution of identity mirrored in the previously examined works by King, Jackson and Langan, arising as a result of puncturing the thin veil that separates us from the ‘negative spaces’ of Negestrini’s ‘holes’.

Baudrillard consistently draws upon the notion that signification and meaning are both only understandable in terms of the ways in which ‘signs’ relate with each other.[[498]](#footnote-498) Baudrillard thought, in common with other post-structuralists, that meaning is brought about through *systems* of signs working together.[[499]](#footnote-499) It is only a relatively small conceptual step to posit that these systems and their inter-dependent *define* reality – and that one system might supplant another, possibly as the result of a dramatic ‘paradigm-shift’.[[500]](#footnote-500) After all, signification itself is a consensual effect, so if that consensus is disrupted – let alone ‘punctured’ – we would expect the system of signification to be stressed perhaps even to suffer an abrupt ‘phase shift’.[[501]](#footnote-501) In a small and increasingly isolated ‘society’, such as that on the island in *No Man*, those systems of signification become compromised – ‘thin’ – and personal identities, forged, as they must be, in societal terms, begin to fragment – or, more relevantly, in this context, to fade, become increasingly ‘thin’ themselves.[[502]](#footnote-502) The ‘pasteboard masks’ of Melville’s Ahab become ever more brittle, and the temptation to ‘smash through’ ever greater.[[503]](#footnote-503) Finally, the island in the story itself fully emerges as a character in its own right – albeit an ‘alien’, inhuman character, and the reader can see that the reassuring physical density of the island is a deceit, King’s ‘filmiest of perceptual curtains’.[[504]](#footnote-504) In *No Man*, the physical characteristics of the island fade increasingly, both in reality (blurred due to mists and storms and continual, torrential rains) and in the increasingly fragmented views of the characters, unable to agree upon a ‘consensus reality’.[[505]](#footnote-505)

Once the process of physical and mental disintegration begins, and a more inimical reality begins to be established, the island itself is able to accommodate, enable or possibly even create the entity which approaches ever-closer through the story.[[506]](#footnote-506) This ambiguity, allowing for multiple readings, is also a way to implicitly reference similar ambiguities in earlier works within the genre. This entity appears to be the child Mike caused to die as a result of his negligence, as revealed through the novel.[[507]](#footnote-507) The general narrative arc of *No Man* is, of course, familiar from the ‘haunted places’ stories mentioned in preceding sections, recounting a ‘wearing away’ of normalcy and the concomitant disintegration of the identities of the protagonists. In this way, the characters are isolated three-fold: geographically, in a traditionally ‘Gothic’ setting; psychologically, by virtue of their differing outlooks and the aspects of themselves which are with-held from the others; and metaphysically, because of their separation from the mass of humanity which usually provides the ‘density’ needed to form a coherent reality. Finally, the human characters have identifying characteristics stripped away: firstly to become ‘islanders’, with life on the island and their island-based tasks becoming their primary defining concern.[[508]](#footnote-508) Then there is a time when they become increasingly ‘at home’ with the occurrences of the supernatural. Finally, their existence is extinguished entirely, even to the extent that after death, bodies are not recovered – both physical and metaphysical existence has been entirely subsumed in the unhuman existence of the island itself. [[509]](#footnote-509) As Eagleton describes‘…the flux of reality has now infiltrated the subject to the point where its unity dissolves and its agency is undermined.’[[510]](#footnote-510) All the uncertainties and ambiguities attendant upon the manifestations of the supernatural are replaced by the new reality which exists a hair’s-breadth from our own.[[511]](#footnote-511)

At the end of the novel, Mike is alone on the edge of a cliff and must decide whether to turn and face the entity which has stalked him and has played a part in the deaths of his colleagues, or to throw himself down to the rocks below. [[512]](#footnote-512) His ability to make such a decision is intended as the redeeming feature of the story, in a genre which can be considered, curiously enough – given the transgressive nature of much of its subject matter – as fundamentally conservative, ultimately favouring a vision of the *status quo*, admittedly not like our ‘usual’ conception, but a world in which bad deeds are punished, severely enough to satisfy even the most severe disciplinarian. Mike, at the end of the story, retains enough of his self-hood to be able to make a decision about how he will meet his fate, and even finds some measure of peace in that realisation:

If the horror story is our rehearsal for death, then its strict moralities make it a reaffirmation of life…just one more pipeline to the infinite.[[513]](#footnote-513)

In the moment of mortal peril, and in the imminent face of destruction which amounts to annihilation, there is still, for Mike, and for the reader, a sense that reality is far greater than that which encompasses all that we know, or dream. It is the enduring sense of wonder – explored in section 1.3.5, above, that perhaps lends the literature of the supernatural an important part of its enduring appeal. For the character of Mike, and for the reader, that sense of wonder – an appreciation of ‘the sublime’ - might be enough to make facing the terrors of existence and non-existence something which can be more easily borne.[[514]](#footnote-514) Thus, it may be that this sense of awe and wonderment at the ‘other’ will be our last vestige of identity, the last means by which we, qua persons, rage against the dying of the light.[[515]](#footnote-515)

**‘A Dream Within a Dream’**

By Edgar Allan Poe

Take this kiss upon the brow!

And, in parting from you now,

Thus much let me avow —

You are not wrong, who deem

That my days have been a dream;

Yet if hope has flown away

In a night, or in a day,

In a vision, or in none,

Is it therefore the less *gone*?

*All* that we see or seem

Is but a dream within a dream.

I stand amid the roar

Of a surf-tormented shore,

And I hold within my hand

Grains of the golden sand —

How few! yet how they creep

Through my fingers to the deep,

While I weep — while I weep!

O God! Can I not grasp

Them with a tighter clasp?

O God! can I not save

*One* from the pitiless wave?

Is *all* that we see or seem

But a dream within a dream?

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2. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Exactly what constitutes such a tale is by no means simple to classify. The matter is discussed in greater detail throughout Chapter 1 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As a good example, created at the end of the twentieth century, of this development in literature, see Dean Koontz, *The Bad Place* (New York, NY: Putnam’s Sons, 1990), further discussed in sections 1.3 and 2.1 below. The evolution of haunted places in the literature under review is discussed in detail in Julian Wolfreys, *Haunted Selves, Haunting Places in English Literature and Culture* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Just to give a flavour of the sorts of generic locations mentioned in relatively recent works: Ramsey Campbell, *The House on Nazareth Hill* (London: Headline, 1997), managing a mention of both natural and man-made locations in the title; Brian Keene, *City of the Dead* (New York, NY: Leisure, 2005); James Ambuehl ed. *Arkham Tales: Legends of the Haunted City* (Ann Arbor, MI: Chaosium, 2006); James Herbert, *The Secret of Crickly Hall* (London: Macmillan, 2006); Michael Koryta, *So Cold the River* (London: Hodder, 2011); Sarah Rayne, *The House of the Lost* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011); Josh Malerman, *A House at the Bottom of a Lake* (New York, NY: This Is Horror, 2016); Sam Gafford, *The House of Nodens* (Portland, OR: Dark Regions Press, 2017); Neil Spring, *The Lost Village* (London: Quercus, 2017); Paul Tremblay, *The Cabin at the End of the World* (London: Titan, 2018). See also footnote 113 below for some geographical terms believed to signal ‘Gothicism’ in literary surveys. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A modern writer making excellent use of the disquiet which resides exactly within this ambiguity is Paul Tremblay – see footnote 5, above, and his book *A Head Full of Ghosts* (London: Titan, 2015). The influences of modernism as a family of movements is explored in more detail in section 1.4, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. By ‘operationalism’ I intend to mean a philosophical viewpoint which takes the definition of concepts as being primarily defined in the ways in which we measure or decide to explore those concepts. It is primarily used in pragmatist and positivist explorations of the philosophy of physical sciences, but seems apposite here, if only by analogy. See Hasok Chang, ‘Operationalism’ at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/operationalism/> [accessed 8 April 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Having given this criterion, these labels are explored in more detail in Chapter 1, notwithstanding my statement of intent – but perhaps the widest and most ‘populist’ term, ‘horror’, actually captures most of the basic elements most succinctly: ‘…a [genre](https://literaryterms.net/genre/) of fiction whose purpose is to create feelings of fear, dread, repulsion, and terror in the audience—in other words, it develops an [atmosphere](https://literaryterms.net/atmosphere/) of horror. Horror literature has roots in religion, [folklore](https://literaryterms.net/folklore/), and history; focusing on topics, fears, and curiosities that have continuously bothered humans in both the 12th and 21st centuries alike. Horror feeds on audience’s deepest terrors by putting life’s most frightening and perplexing things—death, evil, supernatural powers or creatures, the afterlife, witchcraft—at the centre of attention.’ <https://literaryterms.net/horror/> [accessed 8 April 2019] See also footnote 154 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The film and TV critic Syreeta Mc Fadden has gone beyond this, capturing a popular Zeitgeist in her article: Syreeta McFadden, ‘Dystopian stories used to reflect our anxieties. Now they reflect our reality’, *The Guardian* 26 October 2016, archived at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/26/dystopian-stories-margaret-atwood-walking-dead-zombies> [accessed 8 April 2019]. Comparisons have also been drawn between the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the works of Stephen King, in particular in Stephen King, *The Stand: Complete and* Uncut (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990). See Sean T. Collins, ‘We’re Living an Apocalyptic Stephen King novel (In Reverse)’, at <https://theoutline.com/post/8781/the-stand-coronavirus-remake-stephen-king?zd=2&zi=p2po7piu> [accessed 5 April 2020] [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Psychological explanations do not need to be heavily theory-laden; there is a well-established tradition of ‘folk psychology’ which aims to explain most typical, and a good deal of atypical, behaviour without invoking much more than atomistic ‘propositional attitudes’. See Jerry Fodor, *Psychological Explanation: An Introduction to* *the* *Philosophy of Psychology* (New York, NY: Random House, 1968). However, psychological readings of literature generally draw upon much more heavily theory-laden structures such as Freudian psychoanalysis. A good historical perspective on the evolution of psychoanalytical literary criticism is to be found in the collection Maud Ellmann ed. *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. To take examples of such remote places over a two hundred year span: Northanger Abbey in Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (London: Collector’s Library, 2004 [1818]); Bly House in Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th edn. Ed. T. J.Lustig, 2008 [1898]); Manderley in Daphe Du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Gollancz, 1938); and through to the modern era with Susan Hill’s sinister Eel Marsh House in Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983). The list is, of course, potentially huge. This is explored in more detail in section 1.2.1. A few examples of particular *types* of locations mentioned in recent works are mentioned in footnote 5, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Joel Lane, ‘This Spectacular Darkness’ in Joel Lane, *This Spectacular Darkness,* ed. Mark Valentine and John Howard (Leyburn: Tartarus Press, 2016), pp. 1 – 13, p. 1 This echoes the wider critical project of academics such as Northrop Frye (1911 – 1991), positing a ‘centripetal mythology’ in which all literature works ‘inwards’ towards mythologies. One difference would be that writers in some aspects of the ‘horror’ field would be consciously and self-referentially myth-building. I am thinking here of those in the immediate or wider ‘Lovecraft circle’ as being a good example. See further discussions in section 1.3.4. Some of these ‘new realities’ are perhaps what McFadden or Collins had in mind in the references in footnote 9, above. The ‘Lovecraft circle’ is described in greater detail in section 1.3.4 below and in particular in footnote 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London: Continuum, 2005), who gives various definitions of ontological horror, including: ‘…the shock and disorientation that can be provoked…when an accepted / interpreted narrative “reality” is instantaneously revealed to be either one “subjective” level nested within an alternative, “objective” reality…or a radical misinterpretation of diegetic ontology…’ p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Christopher Golden’s *Dead Ringers* exploits this concern with identity-defining structure, along with well-established tropes about mirrors, reflections and doppelgängers (see section 1.3.3 below); ‘…[she]…tried to breathe and told herself that the rules of the solid, tangible world…still applied. But she knew a lie when she heard one…’ Christopher Golden, *Dead Ringers* (London: Headline, 2015), p. 72. This has also been explored in the disquieting film *Us*, in which the whole human race appears to have evil chthonic twins who will emerge to murder (mostly with skin-piercing stabbing implements) their earthly counterparts. See Jordan Peele, dir. *Us*, Universal, US release 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Winnicott saw a ‘transitional space’ between the internal world and external ‘reality’ as being a space in which the imagination would be pre-eminent. Of course, if that imagination is benign, then the experiences in the transitional space are likely to be positive – but with a more malign imagination at work, the experience will be more harrowing – and possibly ultimately destructive. See Donald Winnicott, *Collected Works,* Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. According to Cultural Reader at <http://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/sigmund-freud-uncanny-summary-and-review.html> [accessed 4 April 2018] ‘...the presence of something threatening, tempting and unknown that lies within the bounds of the intimate.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A current which has grown steadily since the work of Edgar Allan Poe would seem to hold that the existence of the supernatural would suggest that ‘all bets are off’ – anything could happen, and humanity would find itself outside of the rule of both human and natural law. ‘…to encounter horror is to be shattered by the totalizing nothingness which can engulf the human process…’ Robert S. Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness, An Essay in Ordinal Phenomenology,* (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2017), p. 29. This is further investigated in section 1.3.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A number of film theorists, such as Barbara Creed and Xavier Mendik, employ Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection to argue that women in the horror film genre – mothers and mother figures especially - are often represented as monstrous beings posing existential threats to men (*mankind*). According to Creed: “…the horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human. As a form of modern defilement rite, the horror film attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies….” Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), p. 14. On the other hand, Stephen Neale and others argue that horror film monsters are predominantly defined as male, with women as their primary victims, explaining that: “In this respect, it could well be maintained that it is women’s sexuality, that which renders them desirable - but also threatening - to men, which constitutes the real problem that the horror cinema exists to explore” Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 14. See also William Rothman and Steven Jay Schneider, *Introduction – Psychoanalysis in/and/of the Horror Film* at <http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/freuds-worst-nightmares-psychoanalysis-and-the-horror-film/horror_psych/> [accessed 26 May 2020] See also, Judith Halberstam *Skin Shows*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,1995).  [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This ‘psychological overlay’ (a term borrowed from descriptions of psychological pathologies), is sometimes given as a defining characteristic of the ‘American Gothic’. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Traditional Scottish prayer, according to D. L. Asliman, ‘Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts: Things That Go Bump in the Night’ at <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/bump.html> [accessed 22 February 2018]

    From ghoulies and ghosties  
    And long-leggedy beasties  
    And things that go bump in the night,  
    Good Lord, deliver us! [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See, for example, Robert Farr, ‘The Significance of the Skin as a Natural Boundary in the sub-division of Psychology’, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, Vol, 27, issue 2/3, June/September 1997, pp. 305 – 23. I echo the words of the protagonist of Stephen King’s *The Green Mile,* a Death Row prison warder: ‘Fragile as blown glass, we are, even under the best of conditions. To kill each other with gas and electricity, and in cold blood? The folly. The *horror*.’ Stephen King, *The Green Mile*, (London: Penguin, 1997) p. 510 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. One is reminded of the sorts of tropes of science fiction which are introduced without great explanatory mechanism in order to ‘get on with’ the story. See, for example, the list at <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/sci-fi-fantasy/the-25-greatest-science-fiction-tropes-ranked/> [accessed 5 April 2020]. Horror tropes are explored in greater detail throughout Chapter 1, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. To demonstrate how wide-spread this trope has become, consider that it is used without further explanation in literary works within the genres under discussion. To take four examples; an early mention is found in Michael Talbot, *Night Things*: ‘…haunted places… [are]…a weak spot…’, Michael Talbot, *Night Things* (New York, NY: Valancourt, 1988), p. 196. Thirty years later, genre authors are more explicit still: Steve Rasnic Tem, *Ubo* (Osney Mead: Solaris Books, 2017): there are places ‘…on the other side of a fragile membrane...’p. 129. Sam Gafford, in *House of Nodens* (2017): ‘… [The old settlers]…believed that those were the areas [where] the barriers were thin…barriers…between this world and the ones beyond.’ The trope has even migrated into adjacent genres, such as psychological crime thrillers – see C. J. Tudor, *Chalk Man* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 211: ‘Thin, I think, that fabric between realities. Maybe minds aren’t lost. Maybe they just slip through and find a different place to wander.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A device itself further explored thematically in Chapter Two. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See the article ‘Theme’ in in J. A. Cuddon ed. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* 4th edn. rev. by C. E. Preston (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 913. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See the article ‘Trope’ in *The* *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* p. 948. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See the article ‘Motif’ in *The* *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* p. 522. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This is explored in detail in Meriem Rayen Lamara, *A Study of the Supernatural in Twenty-first-century Young Adult Gothic Literature,* unpublished PhD. Dissertation, the University of Northampton, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Contrasted with ‘paranormal’ fiction, dealing with entities placed ‘within’ our world (however unlikely that would be in actuality). Thus a work such as Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1976) could be designated ‘paranormal’ fiction – the vampire in question has a ‘natural’ history accessible to human intellect. Such ‘paranormal’ antagonists have been appearing in so-called ‘Young Adult’ (YA) fiction with increasing regularity. See Joni Richards Bodart, *They Suck, They Bite, They Eat, They Kill: The Psychological Meaning of Supernatural Monsters in Young Adult Fiction* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011). A ‘supernatural story’ then, is any story making some use of supernatural entities (ghosts, demons, ghouls, vampires, werewolves etc.); of witchcraft, ‘marvels’ and things beyond normal sensory perception; that which elicits feelings in the presence of any such anomalies – and in which there is no ‘natural’ explanation for the entities. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Elisa Bizzotto and Flavio Gregori, ‘Introduction: The Supernatural between Fact and Fiction, from the Gothic to the *Fin de Siècle’,* English Literature, Vol. 7, December 2020, pp. 4 - 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Distinctions made by Glen [Cavaliero*,*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glen_Cavaliero)  *The Supernatural and English Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). According toNeil Wilson,*Shadows in the Attic: A Guide to British Supernatural Fiction, 1820–1950* (London: The British Library, 2000*),* one genre supernatural fiction therefore seems able to incorporate fully is the traditional ghost story. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Some of these sub-categorisations of the Gothic will be further explored, if not fully described, in subsequent sections, but suffice to say that there are almost as many proposed terms as there are exponents. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Sections 1.2.1 and 1.3.2 below, for some further titular proposals for the various related genres. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Attempts to create genre-spanning definitions may, in any case, be conceptually flawed. Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) proposed that there was no longer (if there had ever truly been) a definitional demarcation between individual works and the literary corpus *in toto,* a notion developed by various post-modernist theorists. See, for example, Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: University of Stanford, 2002); other academics argued that the notion of ‘the canon’ necessarily disadvantaged groups outside of the ‘mainstream’, such as members of the working class, women and members of ‘minority’ ethnic groups. See Gregory Rutledge, ‘Race, Slavery and Re-evaluation of the T’ang Canon’ in Comparative Literature and Culture 16 (2014) at <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2532&context=clcweb> [accessed 2 December 2017] ; Paul Lautner, *Canons and Contexts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) and Stephen Behrendt, *British Women Poets and the Romantic writing Community*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University, 2009). Specifically on the problematic aspect of canon formation, see: Michael Gamer*, Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For an attempt to define some of these slippery terms with logical rigour, see J. Gordon Melton, Introduction to J. Gordon Melton ed. *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, 4th edn. (Michigan, IL: Gale, 1996), pp. ix - xiv [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The ‘sense of wonder ’is often considered to be invoked by works of science fiction, as: ‘…a feeling of awakening or awe triggered by an expansion of one’s awareness of what is possible or by confrontation with the vastness of space and time, as brought on by reading science fiction…’ Jeff Prucher (ed.) *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Without intending to introduce circularity, or descend into nuanced epistemological matters, it might be best to resort to a definition such as: that which is not presently accepted as possible by the majority within the mainstream of the scientific community. This matter is also explored further in subsequent sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Daniel James Hanley, *The Engine of Oracles: 100 Gothic Themes and Motifs* at <https://engineoforacles.wordpress.com/2011/12/22/100-gothic-themes-motifs/> [accessed 3 December 2017]. This therefore excludes ‘scary stories’ which rely purely upon such issues or protagonists as psychological derangement, serial killers etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Henry James, contributed a seminal tale of haunting and possession in ‘The Turn of the Screw’ a tale of psycho-supernatural ambiguity itself echoing Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s (1860 – 1935) ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892). Henry James returned to a ghostly theme several times in his writing career - with ‘The Jolly Corner’ (1908) for example, as did D. H. Lawrence, with stories such as ‘The Rocking-Horse Winner’ (1926). See also section 1.3.6. Forster experimented with the fantastical in several short stories: see, for example, ‘The Celestial Omnibus’ in E. M. Forster, *The Celestial Omnibus and Other Stories* [1911] (London: Quinx, 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Homi Bhabha (b. 1949) asks, *apropos* of events described in Forster’s *A Passage to India*: “What happened in the Marabar caves?” and answers: “*There*, the loss of cultural plurality…”, that is, the dissolution of mutually comprehensible identities into isolated parts Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 126. Matt Hills, writing in a very similar vein about critic and audience response to the film *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyalaman, Buena Vista, US release 1999), describes the ontological shock as being due to ‘…a “paradigm-shift” in comprehension…’, Matt Hills, *Pleasures of Horror*, p. 42. This is explored further in section 1.3.4, below, in relation to ‘negative space’ causing (or being symptomatic of) an indeterminacy which in turn underlies an existential anxiety typical of our age, and translated into contemporary horror. Finally, the trope emerges in the treatment of my own novel, *No Man,* as discussed in Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Stories by Dickens with more overtly ‘supernatural’ elements include such works as ‘The Signal-man’ or even ‘A Christmas Carol’. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Luckhurst, *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Interestingly, the image of solid Victorian furniture gradually redistributed, and ‘lost’ (or at least, no longer noticed as being anomalous) within an increasingly eclectic literary landscape reflects the disintegration of ‘solid’ identity we (don’t) see in the Marabar caves. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Patrick McGrath and Bradford Morrow, ‘Introduction’ in Patrick McGrath and Bradford Morrow eds,. *The Picador Book of the New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (London: Picador, 1992), p. xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. The term ‘New Gothic’ is generally first associated with a [contemporary art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contemporary_art) movement that foregrounds darkness and horror. *See,* Charles Moffat,‘*The Neo Gothic Art Manifesto’,* 2001, 2003 at <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/gothic/The-Neo-Gothic-Art-Manifesto.html> [accessed 9 July 2018] and is further discussed in section 1.2.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. “Whatever universal masterpiece of tomorrow may be wrought from phantasm or terror will owe its acceptance rather to a supreme workmanship than to a sympathetic theme. Yet who shall declare the dark theme a positive handicap? Radiant with beauty, the Cup of the Ptolemies was carven of onyx.” H. P. Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ in *Dagon, and Other Macabre Tales*, ed. August Derleth (London: Panther Books, 1969), p. 221 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. [Theodore Roszak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Roszak_(scholar)),  *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Oakland, CA: University of California, 1969) [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. The term ‘magic realism’ was coined in 1925 by the art critic Franz Roh (1890 – 1965) to describe a contemporary artistic style but came to be applied to literary works by the 1980’s: the defining characteristics are, *inter alia*, juxtapositions of the real and the unreal; convoluted narrative; use of dreams, myths, folk and fairy tales; the use of graphic scenes and the unexplained; and other elements which are instantly recognisable as ‘horror’ tropes and motifs. It is a term which has been applied to the works of authors as diverse as Luis Borges (1899 – 1988), Gabriel Gracia Marquez (1928 - 2014), Italo Calvino (1923 – 1985), John Fowles (1926 – 2005), Angela Carter (1940 – 1992) as well as many others. The entry ‘magic realism’ in *The* *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory,* J. A. Cuddon ed. (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 487-8 makes the point that there is a ‘plausible case’ for arguing that instances of magic realism are to be found in many earlier authors. Arguably, an oxymoron had to be coined to describe these styles, which aimed to combine in a unitary concept the mirror-images of the natural and the extra-natural; see Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Farris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Tzventan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. S. T. Joshi, *Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction, Vol. 1 : From Gilgamesh to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2014), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Penguin, 1991); Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Alan Macfarlane, ‘Civility and the Decline of Magic’ at <http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/TEXTS/THOMAS_civilitiy.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Jim Tester*, A History of Western Astrology* (Woodridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1990) points to a decisive shift in ‘learned opinion’ between the heyday of the occultist Robert Fludd (1574 – 1637) and the deaths of the ‘old guard’ of the Royal Society in the years preceding 1700. Thus the typical audience member for Shakespeare’s plays at the time they were written would have been likely to pay considerable credence to astrology, in at least some of its various forms, even if sceptical about ghosts. There are, of course, examples of events once considered outside of the realm of the ‘accepted’ which we would now, generally, include as scientifically plausible – it was once considered fanciful, for example, that stones could fall from the sky, but we now have a recognised mechanism which explains these ‘meteorites’ in a scientifically plausible manner. See, for example, the article by Kat Eschner, ‘Scientists Didn’t Believe in Meteorites until 1803’ at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/1803-rain-rocks-helped-establish-existence-meteorites-180963017/> [accessed 16 July 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. There are images included in Christian Violatti, ‘The Meaning of European Upper Paleolithic Rock Art’ at <https://www.ancient.eu/article/787/the-meaning-of-european-upper-paleolithic-rock-art/> [accessed 9 April 2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. André Leroi-Gorhan, *The Art of Prehistoric Man in Western Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), p. 174 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. There is even a hint at the possibility of movement between the ‘poles’ of masculinity and femininity, [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. William Golding, *Darkness Visible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), pp, 145 -6 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The exploration of ways in which the inner / outer dichotomy is dissolved is an important issue in the current essay, and is revisited in section 1.2, examining the ways in which ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ narratives can sustain, or undermine each other; in section 1.3.2, where the notion of boundaries between inner and outer realities is explored as becoming a main theme in stories of the supernatural in comparatively recent times; in section 1.3.6, looking at violations of these boundaries, and further exploring this last notion in relation to Bataille’s ‘psychic disintegration’ as a result of transgressions of these boundaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Georges Bataille, *Erotism*: *Death and Sexuality*, trans. Mary Dalmand [1957] (London: City Lights, 2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See *The Epic Of Gilgamesh*, trans. by N. K. Sanders (London: Penguin, 1960) [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. See *Epic of Gilgamesh*, LookLex Text Archive, at <http://looklex.com/textarchive/mesopotamia/gilgamesh07.htm> [accessed 16 July 2018] Tablet 7, lines 14 – 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. See Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988) who examines, *inter alia,* the ancient Greek distinction between mythos (μυθος) and logos (λογος). Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570 – c. 478 BCE) wrote on the tendency to anthropomorphise deities, suggesting a sophisticated secular approach. See the articles on Xenophanes at [www.iep.edu/xenephon](http://www.iep.edu/xenephon) [accessed 15 02 2016] and [www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/xenophanes/](http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/xenophanes/) [accessed 15 02 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Many scholarly texts of these works are available. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by David West (London: Penguin, 2003), and Homer, *The Odyssey* ed. By Dominic Rieu, trans. by E. V. Rieu (London: Penguin, 2003) are acceptable readers’ copies. A scholarly translation of *The Aeneid* by A. S. Kline is to be found at <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Virgilhome.htm> [accessed 8 04 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. John Gaskin, ‘Reality Within ’Supernatural Tales’, *Wormwood: Literature of the Fantastic, Supernatural and Decadent,* no. 26, Spring 2016, pp. 53 – 62, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. The first self-identifying work of fiction to feature a ‘haunted house’ is generally considered to be *Mostellaria*, albeit a comedy, written c. 210 BCE. See Titus Maccius Plautus (c. 254 – 184 BCE), *Mostellaria, or The Haunted House*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley, at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0104%3Aact%3D1> [accessed 12 July 2018], or the translation by Watling, as ‘The Ghost’ in Plautus, *The Rope and Other Plays*, (London: Penguin, 1964), ed. and trans. by E. F. Watling, pp. 23 - 86. Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, born Gaius Caecilius or Gaius Caecilius Cilo (61 – c. 113) wrote about house in Athens haunted by a spirit wrapped in chains (itself destined to become a trope, as in Dickens *A Christmas Carol* – see footnote 41, above) – see ‘The Haunted House’ trans. by John Delaware Lewis and William Melmoth, at: <http://www.thevoicebeforethevoid.net/the-haunted-house-by-pliny-the-younger/> [accessed 12 July 2018]. A detailed account of ghost stories from antiquity is given in Debbie Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome: Ghost Stories from Classical Antiquity* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Liminal in the sense of being an intermediate state, a boundary. Thus, on the boundary between sea and land (an island); between ground and underground (a cave) or between land and sky (a mountaintop). In all cases, the reader is invited to think of such locations as being of neither wholly one type nor another. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. An interesting area of study is to be found in investigating dream states as represented in this ancient literature. In this milieu, dreams ‘happened to’ dreamers, and could be the result of intervention by gods, or by the dead. To put oneself into a dream state was to invite such intervention (although it could not be entirely trusted – even Zeus is depicted as being wilfully misleading). See Gil Renberg, *Where Dreams May Come: Incubation-Sanctuaries in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2017); F.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1968); Hedvig von Ehrenheim, *Greek Incubation Rituals in Classical and Hellenistic Times* (Liege, Belgium: Presses Universitaires de Liege, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *Psyche* (ψυχή) – spirit; *soma* ([σῶμα](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CF%83%E1%BF%B6%CE%BC%CE%B1#Ancient_Greek)) – body. This distinction is often drawn in analysing Greek drama. See, T. B. L. Webster, ‘Some Psychological Terms in Greek Tragedy’ in *Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, Vol. 77, Part 1, 1957, pp. 149 – 54, through to A. A. Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self* (Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. A scene highly charged with repressed sexuality, as well as with many of the ‘boundary’ conditions we recognise as elements of supernatural tales; a mix of sensuous emotions which Kate Brown describes as ranging from ‘ruin porn’ to ‘rustalgia’, which she defines as a longing after the lost recent past. Kate Brown, *Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 149. See also footnotes 57 and 58 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. It would be a mistake to posit a single sense in which people in antiquity understood the term ψυχή as such understandings differed both over time and by location. Some scholars have argued that Homer does not have an understanding of a soul as being separate from the physical body, for example. See Richard Seaford, ‘The Psyche from Homer to Plato: A Historical Sketch’ in Richard Seaford, John Wilkins and Mark Wright, eds., *Self and Soul: Essays on Ancient Thought and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1 -20 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. See Beth Cohen *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer’s* Odyssey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Denys Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955) for an argument that much of the detail of these Greek works were drawn from folklore and exploration. the Greek mythographer Euhemerus (fl. 4th – 3rd C BCE) put forward a similar views, which in more recent analysis of myth, such as [*Bulfinch's Mythology*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulfinch%27s_Mythology), is termed the ‘historical theory’ of mythology, and gives rise to ‘euhemerism’ as a term historical figures ‘mythologised’ into deities or superhumans. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. The ancient Greek tragedians included supernatural elements in many of their plays, the appearance of ‘the supernatural’ generally being a consequence of actions in the ‘natural’ world, often a restoration of balance. Aeschylus (525 – 456 BCE) has the ghost of the Persian emperor Darius lament the rout of his army and navy in *Persae.* As Joshi notes, the chorus profess fear: the appearance of a ghost is clearly not the norm and elicits a dread which contemporary audiences would probably view as entirely justified: ‘I shrink in awe from speaking in your presence by reason of my enduring dread of you...’*Unutterable Horror*, p. 22. For a more detailed account, see Nathan Crick, *Rhetoric and Power: The Drama of Ancient Greece* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Here I am writing about physical centres – of nations, empires or hegemonies – but the language is deliberately resonant with Derrida’s (1934 – 2004) notion of ‘decentering’, a consequence of Derrida’s critique of binary oppositions, especially of speech as against writing, Derrida problematised the very notion of presence, which he characterises as entailing authority, permanence and control; the presence itself contains its own absences, is always undergoing a process of erasure making the notion self-destructive and indeterminate. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. The protagonist Jonathan Harker travels from London to Transylvania in *Dracula*; the Torrances make their way into the mountains to the isolated Overlook in *The Shining.* [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. See Durante degli Alighieri (Dante), *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Dorthy L. Sayers (London: Penguin Classics, 1949 – 1962), *Inferno*, Canto XIII. The very act of mapping, however, reinforces the idea of the physical reality of this terrible place – the entrance to Hell can be found by retracing the instructions which open the poem and maps and plans of Dante’s imagined Hell abound, from Boticelli on. The punishments meted out to the damned are predominantly physical – using fire, and ice, and rending flesh with talons. I wrote a story based around some of this imagery and the notion that the true nature of the infernal punishment is disintegration of identity: Anthony Wilkins, ‘Findings in a Library’, in Rosemary Pardoe ed. *Ghosts and Scholars*, 32, (2001) pp. 22 - 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Botting makes the point that by the time of the Gothic novels of the 18th Century, ‘…Gothic castles and ghosts…[were]…already…clichéd and formulaic…’ Botting, *Gothic*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See footnote 64, above. See also John Drakkis, Dale Townshend, eds.,*Gothic Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2008), for discussion of ways in which Gothic tropes were present in Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The influence of Shakespeare as an ‘appeal to authority’ for Gothic writers is expanded upon in Christy Desmet and Anne Williams, eds. *Shakespearean Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. For discussion of the typology of such places, see Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing eds., *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Framed as attempts to reconcile the judicial requirements to adhere to certain varieties of faith with *actual* beliefs in times of religious persecution. See Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), especially Chapter 1, ‘The Mind’s Retreat from the Face’, pp. 15 – 33, who uses the term ‘citadel self’ to refer to the epistemologically impregnable fusion of inner and outer selves of putative early Elizabethan audiences. Shakespeare, she says, questions this ‘citadel self’ and paves the way for the more nuanced psychology to come in later centuries. George Orwell (1903 – 1950) might have more succinctly designated this as the ability to ‘doublethink’. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. The Goths were tribes of East Germanic origin, divided into two main groups of historical import: the Ostrogoths, or East Goths; and the Visigoths, or West Goths. Robin Sowerby, ‘The Goths in History and Pre-Gothic Gothic’ in David Punter ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), pp. 15 – 26, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. *Ancient Rome*, p. 372. We owe some part of our historical knowledge concerning the ancient Goths to the account given in Jordanes’ (fl. 6th C. CE) emic (an anthropological term for ‘insider’ accounts) work *The Gothic History,* a history itself of subjective and ambiguous nature.An English version appeared as *Jordanes’ The Gothic History*, trans. by Charles Christopher Mierow (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1915). Reputedly partly due to his Gothic ethnicity, Jordanes was asked by Church elders (themselves under direction from their Visigoth rulers) to write a summary of a now-lost work on the Goths by Cassiodorus. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. One modern account of the history of the Gothic peoples is given in Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. These terms are used in the manner Friedrich Nietzsche describes in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, (London: Penguin, 1994, [1871] trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner): ‘We will have achieved much for the study of aesthetics when we come, not merely to a logical understanding, but also to the immediately certain apprehension of the fact that the further development of art is bound up with the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian…their continuing strife and only periodically occurring reconciliation..’ pg. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, p.2. By 1755 Samuel Johnson (1709 – 1784) defined ‘Gothic’ as ‘…one not civilised, one deficient in general knowledge, a barbarian…’ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Wm. Strahan, 1755) [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Edward Gibbon’s (1737 – 1794) monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the first volume of which was published in 1776, describes the role played by the Goths in the downfall of the Roman Empire. It was admired by Walpole (1717 – 1797), who wrote of the ‘…strange contrast between Roman and Gothic manners…’ Letter to William Mason, Saturday 27 January 1781 in W. S. Lewis ed. *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), Vol. 29, p. 98. Where Rome was order, the Gothic was disorder; where Rome was civilisation, the Gothic stood for the wilderness; if Rome was the historical precursor to the triumph of rationalism and ‘good sense’ in the Enlightenment, then the Gothic was an earthy underbelly of sensibility which eventually became Romanticism. In the works of William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616), the value of the term ‘Gothic’ was to be found in its antithetical, and derogatory, comparison with the term ‘Roman’. Touchstone, when finding himself amongst the simple rustic folk in the forest of Arden in *As You Like It* says: ‘I am here with thee and thy goats as the most capricious poet, honest Ovid, was among the Goths’ *As You Like It*, III, iii, 9. All references to Shakespeare are from *Shakespeare: Complete Works* ed. W. J. Craig, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). In the pre-Romantic sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Roger Ascham (1515 – 1568) and John Dryden (1631 – 1700) were two English literary figures perpetuating the perception of Goths as those who had sacked Rome, thereby destroying much of the cultural heritage of the Western world – even responsible for the barbarous act of bringing rhyme into poetry, according to Ascham. These negative stereotypes are indicative of the uses of ‘Gothic’ as a descriptor before the Romantically-inspired re-evaluation of the value of exploring emotions, generally previously considered ‘unworthy’ of serious artistic consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu (1689 – 1755) asserted that the spirit which infused the corpus of English law was born out of a principle of political liberty ultimately derived from the ‘manners’ of Gothic tribesmen: ‘This beautiful system [of English political governance] was invented first in the woods.’ Charles-Louis Secondat de Montesqieu [1748, trans. 1750], *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. by Thomas Nugent (London: George Bell and Sons, 1878), 3 Vols, Vol. 1, p. 163. By way of contrast, ‘Augustan’ became a description of poetic and prose works in 18th century CE meant to evoke the supposed high water mark of culture during the reign of the Emperor Augustus (63 BCE – 14 CE). See Francis Thornton, *Alexander Pope* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952). By the dawn of the eighteenth century, the competitive comparison between Goth and Roman had almost universally (publicly) been settled in favour of the ‘Roman’ values, as we see in footnotes 81 and 83 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Romanticism is as difficult as ‘the Gothic’ to define exactly, often being amenable to directly contradictory explanations. It is perhaps best viewed as a movement or current of thought in art, literature and wider culture, originating in Europe toward the end of the 18th century, which in most areas was at its peak from 1800 to 1850. Romanticism was characterized by its emphasis on emotion and individualism as well as celebration of a largely idealised past, and of nature. It can be viewed as being part of a reaction to the [Industrial Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Revolution), the political mores of the [Age of Enlightenment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment), and the programme which sought to create a scientific rationalization of nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. In the simplest terms, ‘psychologisation’ is the explanation of events, processes and situations in overtly psychological terms. It is given more lengthy formal definition in Angel Gordo and Jan de Vos, ‘Psychologism, psychologising and de-psychologisation’ (2015) at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260479656_Psychologism_psychologising_and_de-psychologisation/download> [accessed 9April 2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. T. S. Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 October 1921. The term refers to the way in which intellectual thought separated from the experience of pure feeling in seventeenth century poetry. In later criticism, the term was sometimes judged to be ill-advised. See, for example, Frank Kermode, ‘Dissociation of Sensibility’ in *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (Spring 1957), pp. 169 – 94, who traces the fluctuating fortunes of the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. An interesting and pertinent account of ways in which perceptions altered towards ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ accounts is to be found in Gavin Budge. *Romanticism, Medicine and the Natural Supernatural: Transcendent Vision and Bodily Spectres, 1789-1852* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. The term ‘anti-establishment’ was first used with the modern meaning in 1958, within *The New Statesman* magazine. Victor Sage writes that the notion of the Gothic was ‘…an ambiguous one….For the 18th century reader, it was an almost unpredictable intersection of religious belief, of aesthetic taste and political inclination.’ Victor Sage, ed. *The Gothick Novel: A Selection of Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan Casebook, 1990), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Jerrold E. Hogle, ‘Introduction’, in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern* *Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary, 1780-1820* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010), pp. 4, 16-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. An indeterminacy found in the ‘once upon a time’ formulations in ancient fairy stories and the ‘…in a galaxy far, far away…’ of modern fantasies. See George Lucas, dir. *Star Wars*, 20th Century Fox, US release 1977. Fairy tales, in their original, unbowlderised forms, are often extremely horrific. See Tobias Carroll ‘Primal Fears and Haunted Paths: The Thin Line Between Fairy Tales and Horror Stories’ at <https://www.tor.com/2017/10/23/primal-fears-and-haunted-paths-the-thin-line-between-fairy-tales-and-horror-stories/> [accessed 17 July 2018]; also Carina Hart, ‘Gothic Folklore and Fairy Tale: Negative Nostalgia’, *Gothic Studies* Vol. 22, Issue 1, (March 2020), pp. 1 -13. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. See Vivian Tower, ‘ A Treacherous Beauty: The Hazards of Entering a Fairy Ring’, posted

    January 7, 2013 at <http://fairyroom.com/2013/01/a-treacherous-beauty-the-hazards-of-entering-a-fairy-ring/> [accessed 17 July 2018] which details some of the supposed effects of entering the fairy realm as described in historical accounts. For accounts of faerie from the medieval to the more recent, see: C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* [1964] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* [1967] (London: Routledge, 2002); and a description of how depictions of faerie changed over time in Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Faeries and the Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1995),p.20. We should be reminded of the discussion concerning ‘magic realism’ in the section above. I return to this theme in section 1.3.4, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. The notion is specifically explored as ‘gateways’ or ‘window areas’ in many works of fiction and esoterica: see, for example, the use made of ‘window areas’ in the work of cryptozoologist John Keel (1930 – 2009). *Daily Telegraph*, Obituary 10 July 2009. These different planes are often mutually incompatible, as seen in Jackson’s unsynthesised contradictions: interior / exterior; dead / undead; natural / supernatural. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. This notion is explicitly explored in an examination of the works of an author generally acclaimed in ‘horror circles’ whilst having produced an extremely small output, T. E. D. Klein. See Thomas Phillips, *T.E .D. Klein and the Rupture* *of Civilization: A Study in Critical Horror* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Tobias Smollett’s (1721 – 1771) *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753) could be regarded as being an early novel to take as explicit central themes physical cruelty and with an avowed intent to engender feelings of terror or revulsion, authorial intent that can be seen as quintessentially Gothic. See the article ‘Gothic novel /fiction’ in J. A. Cuddon ed. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory,* pp. 355 – 61. Not until the second edition of *Otranto* did Walpole actually add ‘Gothic’ to the subtitle – or indeed his name. See E. J. Clery, ‘The Genesis of “Gothic” Fiction’ in Jerrold E. Hogle ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 21 – 39, p. 21. For an examination of the evolution of Walpole’s stance towards his own material, see Stephen Yaegar, ‘Gothic Paleography and the Preface to the First Edition of *The Castle of Otranto’* , *Gothic Studies* Vol. 21, Issue 2, (November 2019), pp. 145 -50. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. John Mulgan, ’Edward Young’ in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, 2nd edn. Rev. by Dorothy Eagle, 1970), p. 626. The graveyard is the liminal space *par excellence*, being a place of intersection between the living and the dead. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. David Stevens, *Cambridge Contexts in Literature: The Gothic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.9. The ‘dominance of reason’ was the programme which became known as the *Enlightenment*. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Indeed, Ann Radcliff introduced a sub-genre which has come to be known as ’explained supernatural’, a technique by which apparently supernatural incidents have a logical explanation, generally presented as a ‘reveal’ towards the end of the work. See ‘Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic’ at <https://eighteenthcenturylit.wordpress.com/contemporary-reactions/the-gothic-in-ann-radcliffes-novels/> [accessed 30 July 2015]. It has become a mainstay of one strand of ‘juvenile Gothic’ appearing with regularity in cartoon series such as *Scooby-Doo*, a U.S. animated cartoon with various iterations in different media from 1969 to the present day. Writers Joe Ruby and Ken Spears created the original series for Hanna-Barbera Productions in 1969. The sub-genre is itself parodied in Edgar Cantero, *Meddling Kids* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2017) – it sometimes seems to be the fate of monsters as they become assimilated into the cultural mainstream to move from being horrific to being figures of fun – *vide* the creatures in the Universal film stable, or even the recent film incarnation of the Predator alien: Shane Blackdir., *The Predator*, 20th Century Fox, US release 2018 – perhaps a step towards that monster becoming a true cultural icon. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. The term was quite possibly applied as much in recognition of Walpole’s home, the ‘little Gothic castle’ at Strawberry Hill in Twickenham which owed much of its design to the Gothic revival in architecture. It is interesting to note that by the time M. R. James (1862 – 1936) came to write ‘The Haunted Dolls’ House’, an original piece for incorporation into Queen Mary's Dolls' House, completed in 1924, for [Queen Mary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_of_Teck), the wife of King [George V](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_V_of_the_United_Kingdom), Strawberry Hill Gothic was an accepted architectural term: ‘…it would have been difficult to find a more perfect and attractive specimen of a Dolls’ House Strawberry Hill Gothic than that which now stood on Mr Dillet’s large kneehole table…’ M. R. James *The Haunted Dolls’ House*, (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Writers such as Daniel Defoe (c. 1660 –1731), Henry Fielding (1707 –1754) and Samuel Richardson (1689 – 1761). A treatment of just how ‘realistic’ these writers were is found in Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957, rev. edn. Pimlico, 2000), especially in the first chapter, ‘Realism and the Novel Form’, pp. 9 – 34. Defoe wrote about ghosts – most notably in Daniel Defoe, *True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs Veal, the Next day after her Death* (London: for B. Bragg, at the Black Raven in Pater-Noster Row, 1706) – however, this is presented as a factual recount: Defoe believed that ghosts confirmed the Biblical belief in life after death. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* trans. by Angus Davidson, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 12. Praz suggest that if the Enlightenment was in any sense an ‘awakening’, then that should be understood to include the opening of the eyes and minds of at least some parts of society to the complex nature of sexual desire. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. *The Romantic Agony*, p. 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. George Bataille, *Literature and Evil* trans. by Alastair Hamilton (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1975) [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. In both historical and literary senses, literary labels such ‘Gothic’, or ‘the supernatural’ seem to be ambiguous at root, more markers of convenience than concept with clear delineations, something often defined by what it is not (*not* canonical, *not* ‘literature’, *not* realistic), or by that to which it is akin (*something like* science fiction, mystery, crime). Clive Bloom writes:

     What is horror fiction? The answer is as complex and problematic theoretically as it seems simple and uncomplicated practically. Moreover the question is not helped by the multiplicity of apparently substitutable terms to cover the same thing…

     Clive Bloom ‘Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition’, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Mainly Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Showerling eds., *The English Novel 1770 – 1829: A Bibliographical Guide,* 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. To be described as a Gothic writer under this rubric could simply be to bear some points of comparison in respect to content or style with the likes of Walpole, Friedrich Schiller (1759 – 1805), Sophia Lee (1750 – 1824) or Matthew Lewis (1775 – 1818) for example. See André Parreaux, *The Publication of the Monk: A Literary Event, 1796 – 1798* (Paris: Marcel Didier, 1960) [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Geographical features such as ‘recess’, ‘black valley’, or even ‘Alps’ count towards inclusion of a work as *Gothic*; so do certain architectural features (priory, abbey, nunnery, ancient house and so on); the word *ghost* and cognates (such as phantom, spectre, necromancer); exotic – especially ‘foreign-sounding’ - names (Manfredi, Wolfenbach); generic historical – one is tempted to say *archetypal* – figures (the monk, the minstrel, the warrior) and generic descriptors used for the work as a whole, such as *legend* or *historical romance.* See alsofootnote 5 and further discussion in subsequent sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. For more details, see Robert Miles, ‘The 1790’s: The Effulgence of Gothic’ in Jerrold E. Hogle ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction,* pp. 41 – 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. In the period 1788 – 1807, Gothic novels (remembering that Miles has allowed a fairly broad definition) account for some 30% of the novels produced in England, peaking at 38% in 1795 (all according to his research, of course), and with the year 1800 marking the greatest *number* of Gothic novels published. As further scholarship unearths more texts, these statistics are liable to alteration. However, it is certain that a significant number of books published within the time frame mentioned fall within the category ‘Gothic’, whatever the exact proportions. I am indebted to Professor Jason Lee for this point and the discussion engendered. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. The *roman noir* in France, for example, and the *Ritterroman, Räuberroman* and *Schauerroman* in German language works, exemplified in some of the writings of Schiller. See Terry Hale, ‘French and German Gothic: The Beginnings’ in Jerrold E. Hogle ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction,* pp. 63 – 84. That there was a Europe-wide appetite for the Gothic is also demonstrated in the number of translations of such English works into continental languages and vice-versa. Again, see Terry Hale, ‘French and German Gothic’ [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. I suspect that the majority of these 21st Century works would be marketed as ‘thrillers’, another modern descendant of the 18th century Gothic; another sizeable bookstore section would be given over to Gothic romance. See Maria J. Perez Cuervo, ‘The Return of the Gothic Romance’ in *Fortean Times* #337, February 2016, 32 – 9, and Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989) [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Fiona Robertson warns against categorisation of a story as Gothic if it ‘…makes no attempt to situate the events of its plot in a historical setting.’ Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic and the Authorities of* *Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 70. Clearly, this might introduce complications for the notion of ‘contemporary Gothic’. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. See, for example, how new science informed new writing, and how newly developing knowledge and theories helped to inform a more general ‘Gothic’ sensibility, as described in: Jason Colavito, *Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge and the Development of the Horror Genre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. See Roger Luckhurst, *Introduction* to Roger Luckhurst ed. *Late Victorian Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2009), p. x. Indeed, whilst Jonathan Harker is a ‘guest’ at the castle, the Count himself appears less often than does fulsome description of his ancestral home. This bold assertion relies upon some fairly subjective decisions about what constitutes a ‘mention’, but from my own readings, I would suggest that the ratio of *Castle: Count* mentions is 3:2 as a conservative estimation. This theme is explored in the previous section. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. For a slightly tongue-in-cheek, but nonetheless instructional, look at these geographical tropes, see the lists prepared at <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HauntedHouse> and <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/EldritchLocation> for *Haunted House* and *Eldritch Location* tropes respectively. See also the chapter ‘Regional Gothic’ in Jarlath Killeen, *Gothic Literature 1825 – 1914*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 91 – 123. Killeen points out that Gothic writers had a penchant for the ‘Celtic fringe’ as representing fertile soil for the Gothic – which may have unconsciously helped to inform me in setting *No Man* in the Hebrides. See section 3.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. See John Bowen, ‘Gothic Motifs’ <http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-motifs> [accessed 8 July 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. ‘The fact that the foreign could exist in the reader’s own neighbourhood made it all the more frightening…’ Robert Kidd, ‘Transgressing the Boundaries’, at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/68822166/Transgressing-the-Boundaries> [accessed 8 April 2018]. If we accept the Freudian interpretation of the ‘uncanny’ as being recognition in the unfamiliar, this increasing proximity – or creeping encroachment – of horror into the ‘every-day’ is an important development. See section 1.3.3, below, for a more detailed examination of this Freudian theme. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. There is a considerable body of theory now based around ‘reader response’. Although literary theory has historically paid some degree of attention to the reader's role in creating the meaning and experience of literary works, modern reader-response criticism began in the 1960s and '70s, in works by [Norman Holland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Holland) (1927 – 2017) (*Five Readers Reading* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 1975) and the novel *Death in a Delphi Seminar: A Postmodern Mystery* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995)), [Stanley Fish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Fish) (b. 1938) (for example, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980)), [Wolfgang Iser](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Iser) (1926-2007), [Hans-Robert Jauss](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans-Robert_Jauss) (1922-1997) and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle*, Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Pearson, 2004), ‘Readers and Reading’ pp. 9 – 18. The ‘second wave’ is reckoned by some to date from G. W. M. Reynolds (1814 – 1879) *The Mysteries of London* (1844), and including certain key works by authors through Elizabeth Gaskell (1810 – 1865), Sheridan Le Fanu (1814 – 1873) and Gaston Leroux (1868 – 1927) to Bram Stoker (1847 – 1912), Vernon Lee (*nom de plume* of Violet Paget 1856 – 1935), Arthur Machen (1863 – 1947), Richard Marsh (1857 –1915) and M. P. Shiel (Matthew Phipps Shiel 1865 – 1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. The definition of ‘New Gothic’ is explored in section 1, above, and in footnote 45, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Explored critically in Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012) and Glennis Byron, Dale Townshend eds., *The Gothic World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) and in literary form in the short stories collected as Darrel Schweitzer ed. *Cthulhu’s Reign* (New York, NY: Daw Books, 2010). It is also a theme explored in John Carpenter dir., *In the Mouth of Madness*, New Line Cinema, UK / US release 1995, and in an essay which asks if this notion will free us from existential angst: David Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void* (USA: Schism Press, 2014). This arguments are revisited in section 1.3.6 below, exploring wider notions concerning the violation of body and soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, trans. Dorna Khazeni (London: Gollancz, 2008), p. 116. Houellebecq’s own fiction, memorably described by Richard Flanagan as ‘suicide notes for the West’ arguably plays upon this post-Gothic theme. See, for example, Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, trans. Lorin Stein (London: Vantage, 2016). Examination of what this means in contemporary culture is explored in Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods and the New Supernatural* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), which some reviewers posited as describing the possible structure of a post-Christian religion, as at <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674725928> See also the article Richard Stanley, ‘The Mythos Meme: Notes on the Emergence of a Post-Truth Religion’ in *Fortean Times* 390, March 2020, pp. 28 – 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. ‘Gothic Motifs’. The Freudian notion of the ‘uncanny’, is obviously closely associated. This is one of the themes explored in Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; Or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), with a critique by Kate Bullen, *Review of The Philosophy of Horror*

     *or Paradoxes of the Heart* at <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=bsides> posted 2009 [accessed 30 May 2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. In works such as Stephen King’s fantasy cycle *The Dark Tower* we see fantasy versions of periods of time mashed together: Arthurian, Wild West, and a post-apocalyptic future, as well as a similar treatment of geographies. See section 2.2, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. The ‘New Gothic’ eschews the necessity of including the more ‘obvious’ Gothic themes and imagery in favour of a ‘Gothic feel’ – in particular, by foregrounding images and descriptions of degeneration, attempts to inspire extreme fear, transgressions of conventional morality and so on. The term was introduced critically in the 1990s but was probably first used extensively in visual arts, with ‘Neo-Gothic Manifesto’(2001, rev, 2003) by Charles Moffat, who held that Gothicism ‘…was a rebellion…against other people's ideas of what was "normal".’ See footnote 45 above.

     In art, the movement has a showcase in Francesca Gavin, *Hellbound* (London: Laurence King, 2008); in literature, it is perhaps showcased in a collection of short stories, Patrick McGrath and Bradford Morrow eds., *The Picador Book of the New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (London: Picador, 1992) [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. See also footnote 104, above. I do not go so far as to state that the *majority* of ‘traditional Gothic’ tales include an element of the supernatural, lacking the statistical information which would enable me to make such a claim. However, I think it likely. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Lovecraft, in ’Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction’ in August Derleth ed., *Marginalia* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1944), pp. 140 – 7, p. 141. This is a particular theme examined *via a vis* Lovecraft in more detail in Dirk Mostig, ‘Lovecraft: The Dissonance Factor in Imaginative Literature’ in *The Miskatonic* vol. 6, no. 4 (1979) [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. [Marshall McLuhan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan) (1911 – 1980) popularized the phrase ‘global village’ in Marshall McLuhan, [*The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gutenberg_Galaxy:_The_Making_of_Typographic_Man) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962) [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. This growing sophistication is borne out by evidence gathered by mass observation studies in the United Kingdom, and described in Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (London: Palgrave, 2002, 2nd edn. 2008), especially the sections ‘Literacy in Practice’ and ‘Reading and the Influence of Cinema, Television and Radio’ pp. 54 – 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Taken from Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1886). The ‘Appollonian’ Dr Jekyll transforms into the ‘Dionysian’ Mr Hyde, and we see the result of the attempt to ‘bury’ our more animal, sensual aspect as violence and mayhem erupts into Jekyll’s ordered (too-ordered?) world. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. The term schizophrenia was introduced into psychological debate in 1908 by Eugen Bleuler (1857 – 1939) as a revised disease concept for Emil Kraepelin's (1856 – 1926) *dementia praecox* Bleuler offered an interpretation based on dissociation or ‘splitting' (*Spaltung*) and widely broadened the inclusion criteria for the diagnosis. From around 1927, there was a steady increase in the number of reported cases of schizophrenia as a diagnosis for trauma-induced conditions such as so-called ‘shell shock’ in veterans of World War I. It was argued in the 1980’s that many such patients were misdiagnosed, and in fact manifested a form of Dissociative Identity Disorder (as later defined in the American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V* (2013), (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 5th edn., 2013)). Of course, the ‘uncanny’ notion of the Doppelganger, or ‘evil twin’ is a staple of the literature we are examining. This is investigated in more detail in section 1.3.3, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. E. J. Clery and Robert Miles eds., *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700 – 1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), Section 4.4. ‘Anon., ‘Terrorist Novel Writing’ (1798), pp. 182 -4, p. 183. An anonymous writer of 1798 offers a recipe for the writing of a popular story of Gothic ilk:

     Take - An old castle, half of it ruinous

     A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.

     Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.

     As many skeletons, in chests and presses.

     An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.

     Assassins and desperadoes, ‘*quant suff*.’

     Noise, whispers, and groans, threescore at least.

     Mix them together, in the form of three volumes to be taken at any of the watering places, before going to bed

     *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700 – 1820*, Section 4.4. ‘Anon., ‘Terrorist Novel Writing’, p. 184. A very similar, modern formulation is given in Evert Jan van Leeuwen, ‘From *Hell House* to *Homecoming* – ‘Modern Haunted House Fictions as Allegories of Personality Growth’ in *Studies in* *Gothic Fiction*, Vol. 4 Issues 1 / 2 2015, pp. 42 - 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. See Oren Ashkenazi, ‘Five Horror Cliches Waiting to be Broken’ at MythCreants [www.mythcreants.com/blog/five](http://www.mythcreants.com/blog/five) posted October 17 2015 [accessed May 26 2020] [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Stephen King, *The Shining* (London: New English Library, 1978). See section 2.2 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. See W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: The Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976) [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. See Jean Kennard, *Number and Nightmare: Forms of Fantasy in Contemporary Fiction* (Hamden, CN: Archon, 1975). This self-awareness also reflects the thread of ‘knowing’ self-reference which seems to grow over the last century or so. See section 3.2 and 4.1 below and the references in footnote 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. As discussed above in section 1.2.1 and footnotes 126 and 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Characterised by authors such as Stephen King, Brian Lumley (b. 1937), James Herbert (1943 – 2013), Dean Koontz (b. 1945), Ramsey Campbell (b. 1946), and Peter Straub (b. 1943) and latterly Clive Barker (b. 1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. See Marco Pasi, ‘Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley’s Views on Occult Practice’ in Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, eds. *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 53 – 88. Crowley writes, in his preface to Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice* (np: Published for Subscribers Only, 1929), p. i : ‘In this book it is spoken of the Sephiroth…Gods, Spheres, Planes, and many other things which may or may not exist…students are most earnestly warned against attributing objective reality or philosophic validity to any of them.’ See also the wider exploration of this theme in section 1.3.5, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Wheatley was a best-selling author from his initial work well into the 1960s. His sales are recorded at <http://www.denniswheatley.info/contents.htm>, and in particular in Charles Beck, ‘Dennis Wheatley: An Introduction’, posted 31 December 2017, [accessed 17 July 2018]. An authoritative biography of Wheatley is to be found in Phil Baker, *The Devil is a Gentleman: The Life and Times of Dennis Wheatley* (London: Daedalus, 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. The sub-genre as recognised today probably has its origins in films generally involve a violent psychopath stalking and murdering a group of people, usually by use of bladed implements, such as knives. They have antecedents in psychological horror films and Italian *giallo* films. The films in turn gave rise to novels such as Rex Miller (1939 – 2004), *Slob* (New York, NY: Signet, 1987); Jack Ketchum (1946 – 2018), *Girl Next Door* (New York, NY: Warner, 1989) – and this continues as a popular sub-genre to more recent times – see, for example, Joey Comeau (b. 1980), *The Summer is Ended and We Are Not Saved* (Toronto, Canada: Chizine, 2013). See also section 1.3.3 and footnote 154 below. Discussion of elements of ‘body horror’ and transgressive motifs in earlier literature is contained in Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siecl*e (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Chris Morgan, ‘No Slime, No Chain-Saws’ in Chris Morgan ed. *Dark Fantasies* (London: Legend Books, 1990), pp. 4 – 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. H. P. Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, p. 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. The literature of the ‘mundanely gruesome’ has its own following, of course. See, for example: <http://nightmaremaniac.tripod.com/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. ‘Slasher’ fiction is as difficult to define as its genre cousins, but I would trace a modern evolution of this sub-genre, following from footnote 148 above, through examples such as Richard Layman, *Night Show* (London: Feature, 1984); through Jack Ketchum, *The Lost* (New York, NY: Leisure, 2001); to one of the more well-known proponents of ‘slasher fiction’ (or, sometimes, ‘splatterpunk’), Edward Lee, *Sacrifice* (New York, NY: Necro, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Explored in section 1.2, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Horror has been defined as that which ‘…shocks or even frightens the reader…’ but is also recognised as being ‘…perhaps a mode rather than an identifiable genre…’ Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ‘Horror Story, pp. 388 – 400, p. 388 [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. SD Tucker, ‘Russell Kirk Part Two: The Never-Ending Tory’, *Fortean Times* no. 362, January 2018, pp. 50 -3, p. 51. See, for example, Russell Kirk, *The Surly Sullen Bell: Ten Stories and Sketches, Uncanny or Uncomfortable, with a Note on the Ghostly Tale* (New York, NY: Fleet, 1962). It should be noted that Kirk believed his home was very much a *positive* supernatural force. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. See S. T. Joshi, *Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction, Vol. 2: The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2014), ch. XV, ‘Anticipations of the Boom’, pp. 589 – 616. See also footnote 145 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. The notion of ‘the other’ is generally used to signify a person or thing defined as a different ‘non-self’. ‘The Outsider’, of course has particular resonance for readers in the genres under examination. See Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (London: Gollancz, 1956) [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Definitions of modernism abound. Aaccording to the Tate: Modernism refers to a global movement in society and culture that from the early decades of the twentieth century sought a new alignment with the experience and values of modern industrial life.’ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/modernism#:~:text=Modernism%20refers%20to%20a%20global,values%20of%20modern%20industrial%20life>. [accessed 11 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) trans. David McLintlock, p.123. Freud’s essay originally appeared in 1919, see also footnote 164 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Freud allows that it is perfectly rational to fear an injurious situation, for example, but wishes to explore the basis of less rational aversion. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. An examination of the different natures of physical transgressions to be found in varieties of horror is in Xavier Aldna Reyes, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgressions in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. *The Addams Family* details a group of fictional characters created by [American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) [cartoonist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartoonist) [Charles Addams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Addams) (1912 – 1988), intended as a satirical inversion of the ideal American family; an eccentric clan delighting in the [macabre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macabre) and in disturbing conventional folk and accepted mores. The family originally appeared in an otherwise unrelated group of one hundred and fifty single panel cartoons in [*The New Yorker*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_Yorker) and other outlets, between their debut in 1938 and the death of Charles Addams in 1988. The concept has since been adapted to other media, including television series (both live and animated), films, video games and a 2010 [musical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Addams_Family_(musical)). [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. *The Uncanny*, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. In the 1906 paper, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny.* See <http://art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch_uncanny.pdf> [accessed 7 April 2014] Jentsch proposes that the uncanny is a result of a feeling of disorientation, and it is this insight which Freud develops in his better-known treatment. This is not that far removed from Jackson’s definition of ‘the fantastic’ given above, and describes the ‘familial trait’ which distinctively links these related genres and sub-genres. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. See also section 1.3.4 and footnote 172 below, which explore the prevalence of mirrors in stories of the supernatural and section 1.3.6, *Reflections of Reality*. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. It is important to note here that many stories of the sort we are examining not only involve transgressions but are created by persons who have ‘transgressed’ various societal norms and are ‘outsiders’ by virtue of birth, background or choice. It is beyond the scope of this essay to look at this in detail, but one such discussion concerning both authors and their themes is to be found in Jenny DiPlacidi, *Gothic Incest: Gender, Sexuality and Transgression* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 132. Freud quotes Friedrich Schelling (1773 – 1854) that the uncanny is ‘…that which ought to have remained…secret and hidden but has come to light...’ which seems to capture the essence of those places which somehow allow ingress into ‘other’ places. I am reminded of a Lovecraft quotation to describe the horror felt by a protagonist: ‘…things have learnt to walk which ought to crawl…’, ‘The Festival’, in *Weird Tales*, January 1925, pp. 169 - 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol or The Theatre of the Great Puppet is more commonly known as the Grand Guignol. It was originally a theatre in the [Pigalle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quartier_Pigalle) neighbourhood of Paris, open from 1897 to 1962 which specialised in naturalistic [horror](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror_and_terror) shows. The name is now a general term for graphic horror entertainment, usually with very bloody and violent scenes and is associated with mannered acting and exaggerated special effects. For historical records and some surviving playscripts (many by André de Latour, comte de Lorde (1869–1942)), see: Richard Hand and Michael Wilson, *The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002) and Agnes Pierron, *Les Nuits Blanches du Gran-Guignol* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. I am reminded of a comment passed in Clive Barker’s (b. 1952) introduction to his seminal collection, *The Books of Blood*: ‘Everybody is a book of blood; wherever we're opened, we're red.’ Clive Barker, *Books of Blood* Vols. 1 – 6 (London: Sphere, 1984 – 85) [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. See Clifford Hallam, ‘The Double as Incomplete Self: Studies in Poe, Melville and Conrad’, *Dissertations Abstracts International* 40 (Miami, FL: Miami University, 1979), and Peter Waldeck, *The Split Self: From Goethe to Broch* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1979) [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. See, for example, Rochelle Kronzek, ‘Introduction’ to Rochelle Kronzek, ed. *The Vampire, the Werewolf and Other Gothic Tales of Horror by John Polidori and Others* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2009) and T. E. Apter, ‘The Double: Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; Hoffmann’s *The Devil’s Elixirs*; Dostoevsky’s *The Double* in T. E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 48 - 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. See <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MirrorMonster> [accessed 11 April 2018]. Indeed, such is the resonance of the trope that there have been works which centre explicitly on mirrors – such as Graham Masterton, *Mirror* (London; Hammer, 1988) and the film *Mirrors* (dir. Alexandre Aja, *Mirrors*, 20th Century Fox, US release 2008). This trope is closely associated with the ‘uncanny double’ as explored by Jentsch – see the discussion above. A classic exploration of this theme in the literature is Jack Finney’s *The Body Snatchers*, discussed in greater detail in section 1.3.4. This is further interrogated in relation to the current thesis in section 1.3.6, *Reflections of Reality*, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle*, Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Pearson, 2004), ‘The Uncanny’ pp. 34 – 41, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. *Literature, Criticism and Theory,* p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Author John Langan, for example, treated in more depth in section 2.3 below, was until 2019 an instructor at [the State University of New York at New Paltz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SUNY_New_Paltz), teaching creative writing and lecturing on Gothic fiction. The history and structure of ‘horror’ is often incorporated into his stories. Indeed, he has sometimes seen this as a bar to publication, saying of his first novel: “This book had a hard time finding a home: the genre people weren’t happy with all the literary stuff; the literary people weren’t happy with all the genre stuff.” See <https://johnpaullangan.wordpress.com/> [accessed 9 April 2017]. Lovecraft wrote his own overview of supernatural fiction, and King produced *Danse Macabre*, but there are many more examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. John Langan writes: ‘…contemporary crime writers engage quite robustly with the traditions of their genre, as do writers working in what Salman Rushdie has called mimetic naturalism, i.e. mainstream literature.  (For example, writers of hard-boiled detective fiction allude in ways implicit and explicit to Hammet and Chandler; while writers of fiction set in the American south make constant reference to working in the shadow of Faulkner [and increasingly, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and William Gay ])… certain best-sellers in the various genres show little-to-no knowledge of their generic contexts (Michael Crichton, anyone?)… Which in turn prompts me to wonder if their popularity in some way connects to their failure to contextualize themselves formally, which allows a reader unfamiliar with that backdrop easier access to them?’ John Langan, e-mail correspondence 2015 – 2018, John Langan, ‘Greetings from across the Pond (6)’, e-mail message to Anthony Wilkins, 23 July 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Some of the material that follows in this section was previously examined in Anthony Wilkins, ‘The Supernatural and Cultural Incommensurability in Selected Fiction by E. M Forster, Raja Rao and Ben Okri’, unpublished MA thesis, Open University, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Sir Walter Scott, ‘On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition; and Particularly on the Works of Ernest Theodore Hoffmann’, Foreign Quarterly Review, I, 1827, reprinted in Ioan Williams ed. *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, 1968), pp. 312 – 53. Freud, of course, also took Hoffmann’s tales as an exemplar. See section 1.3.3. above. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. ‘On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition’, p. 315. Scott praises the descriptions found in John Milton’s (1608 – 1674) *Paradise Lost* (1667) of Death in which ‘…all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible and sublime to the last degree.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. ‘On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition’, p. 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. *Fantasy*, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. ‘A metaphysical grounding claim explains, or accounts for, an apparent fact…’ Ben Holloway, ‘What is Metaphysical Grounding?’, posted 29 April 2015, at <http://www.hollowayquarterly.com/2015/04/what-is-metaphysical-grounding.html> [accessed 19 July 2018]. See also the introductory collection, Benjamin Schnieder and Fabrice Correia eds., *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. See: Acep Hale, ‘What Does ‘Cosmic Horror’ Mean? Five Horror Writers Weigh In’ at <https://lovecraftzine.com/2016/05/13/what-does-cosmic-horror-mean-five-horror-writers-weigh-in/> [accessed 18 July 2017] for some proposals for the definition of *this* term. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Lovecraft initiated a ‘circle’ of like-minded writers into a shared and loosely connected ‘mythos’ – John Langan writes: ‘… It’s he who makes the writing of such contemporaries as Blackwood and Machen—and later Clark Ashton Smith and Robert E. Howard—part of the allusions that permeate his work, so his admiration for those other writers becomes part of the substance of his fiction.  Of course, Lovecraft then goes on to play all kinds of intertextual games with Smith, Howard, and younger writers such as Robert Bloch and Fritz Leiber, who join in the fun, with the result that you have the feeling all of those writers are engaged in creating something much greater than any of their individual works.  And then subsequent writers, from Brian Lumley to Ramsey Campbell to Caitlin Kiernan to Laird Barron, continue the project.   No matter the genre, I think this kind of intertextuality allows writer and reader to feel connected to something greater.’ John Langan, ‘Greetings from across the Pond (6)’. E-mail message to Anthony Wilkins, 23 July 2018.  [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. H. P. Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ in *Dagon, and Other Macabre Tales*, ed. August Derleth (London: Panther Books, 1969), pp. 141 – 221, pp. 141-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Kirby McCauley, ‘Introduction’ in Kirby McCauley ed. *Dark Forces* (London: Futura, 1981), pp. ix – xiv, p. xiii.*Dark Forces: New Stories of Suspense and Supernatural Horror* is an [anthology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthology) of twenty-three original [horror](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror_fiction) stories, first published by [The Viking Press](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Viking_Press) in 1980. *Dark Forces* won the [World Fantasy award](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Fantasy_award) for best anthology or collection in 1981 and is widely celebrated as a landmark anthology in the field, reputedly providing the inspiration for Clive Barker’s *Books of Blood.* This quote in turn brings to mind the W. B. Yeats (1865 – 1939) poem ‘The Second Coming’: Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; /Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world… W. B. Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’ l. 3 – 4, in Edward Larrisey ed. *W.B. Yeats, The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 91 – 2. Yeats recognises the elemental allure of this ‘rough beast’, rather as genre writers appreciate the visceral appeal of their genre (to some!) [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. ‘A common theme in H.P. Lovecraft’s stories is the seeker after knowledge who goes insane when he discovers the terrible truth.  What that truth is differs from tale to tale, but the common denominator is that whatever it is, it’s so horrible, so awful, that the protagonist wishes he’d never gone searching in the first place…’ Mike Davis, ‘What Terrible Truth about Reality Would Drive You Insane?’ posted 26 November 2013 at <https://lovecraftzine.com/2013/11/26/what-horrible-truth-about-reality-would-drive-you-insane/> [accessed 19 July 2018] Insanity, of course, is another diminution of personhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Ramsey Campbell, ‘Introduction’ in Tim Lebbon, *As The Sun Goes Down* (San Francisco, CA: Nightshade Books, 2000), pp. 1 -2, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Stephen King, Introduction to Stephen King, *Night Shift* (London: New English Library, 1978), ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Van Leeuwen notes in ‘From *Hell House* to *Homecoming*…’ that a part of the ‘pleasure’ to be derived in experiencing tales of haunted houses might involve ‘…disintegration of the protagonist…’ but also suggests that traditional stories generally result in a stronger personality emerging at the end – I suggest instead that in modern ‘haunted place’ stories absolute horror emerges from the dissolution of personality. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. See Jack Flacco, ‘Why Do Zombies eat Brains?’ at <http://jackflacco.com/2013/11/04/why-do-zombies-eat-brains/> [accessed 17 February 2016]. Flacco dates the popular image of zombies craving specifically brains to Dan O’Bannon dir. *Return of the Living Dead* (1985). See also Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2015). In all these cases, there is a notion that the ‘undead’ are lacking in some vital property that the living possess – be that brains (for zombies), blood (for vampires), or less defined life-force (as perhaps in *The Shining*), [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. *The Fantastic*, p. 36, and as is seen in the Lovecraft quote above. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. *The Fantastic*, p. 31. As indicated in my Introduction, I am not concerned with interrogating ‘genre labels’ as such, but in investigating the degree to which these efforts at definition have shed light upon the central thesis of this essay – the emergence of notions of ‘thin-ness’ both as horrifying literary tropes and as signifiers of a psychological current in ‘genre’ stories. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. None of the characters in Langan’s *House of Windows* strikes the reader as being particularly reliable but the cumulative effect of their testimonies, reported third, fourth, fifth-hand, is to less to undermine our faith in their accounts than to question whether there *can* be an unambiguously ‘true’ account. This uncertainty in turn helps to situate the ‘thin place’ in the family home. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Roger Caillois, quoted in *The Fantastic*, p. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Stephen Prickett, ‘Uncle Henry’s Trousers; Or, The Metaphysical Status of Other Worlds’ in Robert A. Collins and Howard D. Pearce eds., *The Scope of the Fantastic – Theory, Technique, Major Authors* (London: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 57 – 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. As introduced in section 1.3.3, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. See A. S. Byatt, ‘The Omnipotence of Thought: Frazer, Freud and Post-Modernist Fiction’ in *Passions of the Mind: Selective Writings* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 123 – 64, p. 123; T. S. Eliot, ‘*Ulysses*, Order and Myth’ in Frank Kermode, ed. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 175 – 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Part of the appeal of the neo-Gothic, perhaps, even to the extreme of ‘chaos magic’ and the ‘occultisation’ of some fantasy writers which sees invocations to ‘entities’ first presented in relatively recent works of fiction. For interestingly different approaches, see: Mary San Giovanni, ‘Lovecraft and the Occult’, posted 19 April 2018, <https://www.apex-magazine.com/lovecraft-and-the-occult/> [accessed 11 April 2019], and Erik Davies, ‘The Magick of H.P. Lovecraft’, posted 5 December 2015 <https://techgnosis.com/h-p-lovecraft/> [accessed 11 April 2019]. This may seem an inverse of the processes of psychologisation of the occult, defined in footnote 90 and discussed in sections 1.3.1, 1.3.2 above and again in 1.3.5 below; however, I would suggest that in fact the two processes run in parallel, being narratives with a high degree of commonality. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Futura, 1982), p. 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. See also section 1.3.3 above, in respect of the ways in which reflections, doppelgangers and doubles have undermined a sense of identity in protagonists. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Arthur Machen, ‘The White People’ in Arthur Machen, *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural* (London: Panther, 1975), 2 Vols., Vol 1. pp. 65 – 106, p. 67 – 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Lovecraft parodies ‘the unnameable’ in his story of that name, in which the protagonist, an author, says of himself: ‘…my constant talk about “unnameable” and “unmentionable” things was a very puerile device, quite in keeping with my lowly standing as an author. I was too fond of ending my stories with sights or sounds which paralysed my heroes’ faculties and left them without courage, words, or associations to tell what they had experienced.’ See H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Unnameable’ at <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/u.aspx> [accessed 6 April 2018]

     David Peak, ‘*Horror Religiosus*: The Dark Passions of Mark Samuels’, in Jon Padgett, ed. *Vastarien*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, Spring 2019, pp. 43 - 64 argues that Machen demonstrates both awe of, and desire for, the ‘unknown’ – in fact seeks ‘an embrace’. There is more on this theme in section 1.3.6 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. See Erin Cordery, ‘Sublime Panic: Reassessing Arthur Machen’s Gothic Fiction of the 1890’s’, unpublished MRes thesis, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia 2015. There is a long history of apophasis in theology from Philo (20 BCE – 50 CE) in antiquity to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. late 5th to early 6th centuries CE) through to Karl Barth (1886 – 1968), and reflected in the philosophy of the early Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951), as in footnote 213, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Erin Cordery, ‘Describing the Indescribable: Negative Space and the Intangible Body in *The Great God Pan’,* in *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies,* Volume 2, Issue 1, June 2015, pp. 49 – 59, p. 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. William R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*, p.114. See also the earlier discussion around defining the supernatural in section 1, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Perhaps rather returning us to the claims of Bennett and Royle mentioned in section 1.3.3 that there is an element of ‘the uncanny’ in every fiction, whatever the genre – all stories seeking to draw something unfamiliar out of the familiar, all being by definition ‘un-real’. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. E. M. Forster*, A Passage to India*, [1924] ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Paul Werth coined the phrase ‘text –world theory’ as an attempt to examine elements of fiction which operate in the unfamiliar (without being about the supernatural) to explain binaries and un-met expectations. Paul Werth, ‘World Enough and Time’: Deictic Space and the Interpretation of Prose’ in Roland Carter and Peter Stockwelleds., *The Language and Literature Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 155-166. See also Paul Werth *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse (*London*:*  Longman, 1999). Werth offers an interesting analysis of Forster’s ‘city’ in *A Passage to India*. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. I am aware that there is a whole other set of interpretations which involve postcolonial theory: that the ‘density’ of experience can be viewed as providing a framework for a re-examination of a clash of incommensurate cultures. See Anthony Wilkins, ‘The Supernatural and Cultural Incommensurability in Selected Fiction by E. M Forster, Raja Rao and Ben Okri’ [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must not speak. My translation, 16 February 2016. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung *in*  Wilhelm Ostwald ed. *Annalen der Naturphilosophie*, 14 (1921). See also the discussion above and footnote 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. There is, of course, considerable debate about the ‘privileging’ of works in a canon, and whether the concept is even coherent let alone worthwhile. See John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) and a defence of the notion in Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1995) [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature,’ p. 221. The article was first (self) published in *The Recluse* 1 (1927), pp. 23 – 59, although written between 1924 and 1927, according to bibliographical information at <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/litcrit/shil.htm> [accessed 25 March 2004], <http://www.fantasticfiction..co.uk/authors/H_P_Lovecraft.htm> [accessed 25 March 2004] and the article ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ in S.T. Joshi and David E. Schulz*, An H. P. Lovecraft Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2001), pp. 255 – 6. An engrossing account of the ways in which Lovecraftian themes have become embedded in modern in modern culture see W. Scott Poole, *In the Mountains of Madness* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull, Counterpoint Press, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. King’s books appear in *New York Times* year’s top ten bestsellers every year of the 1990s excepting 1997, every year of the 2000s excepting 2000, 2003, 2005 and 2007, and every year in the next decade excepting 2010, and again in 2020. In several years King as had two separate works appear in the list. See <http://www.hawes.com/> [accessed 12 April 2014 and again 29 May 2019] King has received more than fifty ‘genre’ awards since 2000, as well as recognition form the American Library Association in 2010 and 2014, and was awarded the National Medal of Arts from the U. S. National Endowment of the Arts in 2014 by then-President Barack Obama. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. *Danse Macabre*, p. 18. King does go on to point out that we should bear in mind that not all art is *good* art. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. See Brian Doherty, ed. *American Horror Fiction From Brockden Brown to Stephen King* (New York, NY: Insights, 1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Echoing the postmodern assault upon ‘Aristotle’s’ dramatic unities – of place, time and action, introduced in the sixteenth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. ‘Remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity…to know what we were confirms what we are…’ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Different Country*, p. 197, following David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, Part 4, section 6 (London: John Noone, 1739) [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. The perfect Romantic response to the (some would allege) overly-intellectualised Age of Reason and the famous Cartesian aphorism, ‘I think, therefore I am.’ By the ‘Age of Reason’ I am thinking here of the philosophical movements which gathered momentum during the 17th Century CE, associated with the major rationalist figures, René Descartes (1596 – 1650), Gottfried von Leibniz (1646 – 1716) and Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677) and the growth of scientific methodologies. ‘I think therefore I am’ (the ‘cogito’) is, of course, associated with Descartes, and in particular with his *Discourse on Method* (1637) [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Some modern critics and writers have called into question the very notion of a literary canon – Shelley Walia for example, writes that ‘…the existing canon is now continuously overwhelmed by World Literature and Popular Culture…shifting the focus of literary study from the canonical to Cultural Studies.’ The important part played by the supernatural in popular culture (although more particularly in film, rather than in literature, I would suggest), places the ‘horror story’ firmly within Walia’s ’anti-canon’. Shelley Walia, *Edward Said and the Writing of History* (Duxford: Icon Books, 2001), p. 77. For an account of the transition from Romanticism to the Gothic, and the ways in which works became ‘canonical’ in both genre and wider terms, see Michael Gamer*, Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Here again we see an emergence of the previously discussed notions of ‘psychologisation’. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. There is no real sign of such rosy re-integration in prospect in either *Hill House* or *House of Windows*, and only a smidgeon more hope is apparent in *The Shining*, suggesting perhaps that ‘real’ horror serves no such therapeutic aim or does so only accidently. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Algernon Blackwood, ‘The Willows’ in Algernon Blackwood, *Best Ghost Stories* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2002), pp. 1 – 60, p. 9. This is reflected in the way in which Azaro, in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, reacts to the siren call of his spirit companions, firstly hearing them ‘…enticing me to a world where I would never be lost…’ then, as Azaro sees them, in a moment of epiphany ‘…spirits in full bloom on a field of rainbows, bathing in an ecstasy of everlasting love…’ Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Vintage, 2003), p.22. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Perhaps most notably in the recorded writings of Christian mystics who ‘flowered’ in the 11th - 14th centuries: Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179), Francis of Assisi (1182 – 1224), Dominic of Spain (1170 – 1221), Bonaventure (1221 – 1274) and the anchorite Julian of Norwich (c.1342 – c. 1416) See S. Abhayananda, *History of Mysticism* (London: Watkins, 2002) for an ‘insider’ history of mysticism which aims to show how it transcends geographical and religious boundaries. Here again, we can see a possible source of the move towards ‘occultisation’ of some world-building fantasy writers, as mentioned above in section 1.3.4, and in particular in footnote 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Deep time is sometimes also described as the concept of [geologic time](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geologic_time_scale), first developed in the modern sense by the [Scottish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_people) geologist [James Hutton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Hutton) (1726–1797). This notion was also adopted, in a looser sense, by Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophist movement to describe time on a cosmological scale. See Jack Repcheck, *The Man Who Found Time:*[*James Hutton*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Hutton)*and the Discovery of the Earth's Antiquity*. ([Cambridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge,_Massachusetts): Perseus Books 2003) and Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004). Lovecraft experienced something of this feeling personally on a trip to Marblehead, Massachusetts, in December 1922, an experience he later described as being ‘…the most powerful single emotional climax experienced during my nearly forty years of existence…’:

     ‘In a flash all the past of New England—all the past of Old England—all the past of Anglo-Saxondom and the Western World - swept over me and identified me with the stupendous totality of all things in such a way as it never did before and never did again. That was the high tide of my life.’

     *H. P. Lovecraft Selected Letters*, Donald Wandrei and August Derleth eds.,Vol 3. 1929 – 1931 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1998) pp. 126–27.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. See also discussions of ‘cosmic horror’ above, particularly section 1.3.4 above, and footnote 183, and the discussion about Rosemary Jackson’s thoughts on ‘the fantastic’ in section 1.3.6, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Hermann Melville, *Moby Dick* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851), ch.36. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. See, for example, Newton Arvin, ‘Melville and the Gothic Novel’, *New England Quarterly*, 22 (1949), pp.33-48, and Nalini Shetty ‘Melville’s Use of the Gothic Tradition’, in *Studies in American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 144 -153. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. See Anthony Magistrale, ‘More Demon than Man: Melville’s Ahab as Gothic Villain’ in *Extrapolation*, 27 (1986), pp. 203 – 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. See James Riley, ‘Notes on the Modernist Ghost Story’ in Mark Valentine ed. *Wormwood*, No. 25, Autumn 2015, pp. 3 – 15. For greater detail on the ‘psychologisation’ in the Western esoteric tradition, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clark, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially the final chapter, ‘Modern Esotericism and New Paradigms’, pp. 229 – 51. Also of relevance is C. G. Jung, *Psychology and the Occult*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). See also the discussion concerning Aleister Crowley and his novel *Moonchild*, in section 1.3.2 of this essay and the associated discussion of modern psychology arising partly as a result of the Romantic movement’s ‘dissociation of sensibility’ in section 1.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. The intercessionary angels of prayer and the wish-granting demons of ‘traditional’ magical ritual become, in the psychologised occultism of the modern era, beings not ontologically separate from the magician but related parts of a (generally fragmented) mental organic whole, which must be synthesised for the sake of ‘spiritual growth’ and ‘emotional stability’: ‘…the guardian angel of the *Gold- und Rosenkreuzer* becomes the Higher Self of the Golden Dawn and eventually the Self of Jungian psychology, Jung’s Philemon...’ Hereward Tilton, ‘Occultist Kabbalah from Eliphas Levi to Aleister Crowley’, paper presented at EXESESO conference, University of Exeter, January 2012. See also the discussion in section 1.3.2 and subsequently in section 1.3.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. I am thinking here particularly of the stories written by Aleister Crowley (1875 – 1947), Dion Fortune, nee Violet Mary Firth (1890 – 1946), or H. P. Blavatsky (1831 – 1891) See H. P. Blavatsky, *Nightmare* *Tales* [1892] (Teddington, Middlesex: Echo Library Press, 2009), Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild* [1929] (York Beach, ME: Weiser Press, 1999), Dion Fortune, *The Sea Priestess* [1935] (London: Society of the Inner Light, 1998). There are plenty of other examples. Again, this is related to the arguments proposed in section 1.3.2, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. ‘Reintegration’ is a procedural facet of Jung’s ‘individuation’ programme. See, for example, ‘Jung and His Individuation Process’ at <http://journalpsyche.org/jung-and-his-individuation-process/> [accessed 23 July 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. In Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos, Nyarlathotep, also characterised as ‘The Crawling Chaos’ is the messenger of the Outer Gods. The character appears in many forms through Lovecraft’s fiction. See the articles ‘Nyarlathotep’ in Daniel Harms, *Encyclopedia Cthulhiana* (Oakland, CA: Chaosium, 1994), pp. 150 -6. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz discuss the prose poem ‘Nyarlathotep’ in S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz *An H. P. Lovecraft* *Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2001), pp. 190 -1, and warn that the entity’s ‘…physical form is not consistent from story to story, much less his thematic significance...’ [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Stephen Sennitt, ed., *The Infernal Texts Nox and Liber Koth* (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon, 1997), pp. 108 – 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Stephen King, ‘Foreword’ in Stephen King, *Night Shift* (London: New English Library, 1979), pp. 11 – 21, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Dorothy Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (Maple Shade, NJ: Lethe Press, 2001 [1917]), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Fritz Leiber, *Our Lady of Darkness* (London: Fontana, 1978), p.187 [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. *Danse Macabre*, p. 458 [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. The One Ring in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* cycle is one such ‘terrible’ magical artefact. See J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Allen and Unwin, single volume edn., 1968) [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. I reflect here the comment attributed to Sir Arthur C. Clarke (1917 – 2008): ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’, also called Clarke’s Third Law, which appeared as such in the 1973 revision of ‘Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination’, in Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*  (London: Gateway [1962], rev. edn., 1973), pp. 21-42 [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. The influences more widely of the currents of modernism are explored in a little more detail in section 1.4, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. See, for example Jacques Lacan ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalystic Experience’ in Alan Sheridan, trans. *Ecrits, A Selection* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), pp.1 – 7. Lacan’s thoughts are explored in a little more detail in footnotes 165, 166 and 172, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Fred Botting, *Gothic: New Classical Idiom Series* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.1. See also Botting’s insight into the ‘appropriation’ of Gothic themes, and the way in which they might have been viewed by a contemporary readership, in section 1.2, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. I am thinking of positivism as a philosophical theory which holds that that certain knowledge is based on, information about ‘the world’ derived from sensory experience, and interpreted through reason and logic. This was formally proposed by writers such as Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857) in works such as Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism* trans. by J.H. Bridges [1865] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. For the last mentioned as viewed through the lens of contemporary ‘horror fiction’, see Joel Lane and Tom Johnstone eds., *Horror Uncut: Tales of Social Insecurity and Economic Unease* (Whitby: Gray Friar Press, 2014) which advertises itself thus: “The Con Dem Coalition government’s policies have brought real life horror stories…We asked fine writers of horror to bring dark visions of a society blighted by poverty, debt and privatisation, exploring what ghosts, private madness and afterlife such a world might bring.” [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. If Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870), for example, exemplifies a certain (qualified) breed of Victorian optimism, then there is an equal and opposite reaction in the works of a writer such as George Gissing (1857 – 1903). [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. See the majestically pessimistic Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 1926), originally published in Germany in two volumes, 1918 – 1923, as *Der Untergang des Abendlandes.* Pessimistic works of the current century probably require no particular mention. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, New Accents Series* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Julian Thompson, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Great British English Ghost Story’ in Ceri Sullivan and Barbara White eds. *Writing and Fantasy* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 207 – 22, p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. This theme is explored in more detail in examining the ‘financial horror stories’ in sections 2.2 and 2.3, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Michel Foucault, ‘Language to Infinity’ in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 53. This is rather in the same manner as the various undead creatures of which the genre treats. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. David Punter and Glynis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. The emergence of the ‘New Gothic’ demonstrates a genre which is very self-aware of the distance between itself and both historic and contemporary Gothic in terms of the desired outcomes, but which seeks to explain modernity as essentially ‘Gothic’. Some might even go so far as to assert that the advent of modernism has rendered all our experience as Gothic to some extent. This was also explored in section 1.2.1 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. *Fantasy*, p. 18. In his writings, Lovecraft himself utilises traditional Gothic trappings within arguably modernist themes. He also wished to reflect and reference works by authors such as Poe. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. *Fantasy*, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. *Fantasy*, p. 35. This unsettling ambiguity is foregrounded, and is the very element Todorov identifies as being definitional. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Jean Bellemin-Noel, ‘Des forms fantastiques aux themes fantasmatiques’, *Litterature* 2, 1971, pp. 103 – 28. This develops the themes of the unnameable, the (allure of) the ‘unsayable’ and a view of the unreal as the fount of ultimate horror as discussed in section 1.3.4 above, and referenced in footnote 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. See the section above where Lovecraft discusses this aspect of his own work, and in particular footnote 199. Arguably, there may also be the ‘thingless names’ of writers such as Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson, 1838 – 1892), who invented words without determinate reference. Of course, paradoxically, we generally *do* imbue these portmanteau creations with meaning. There is an illuminating discussion of this mental process in Douglas Hofstadter (b. 1945), *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1979) [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Lovecraft was, by all accounts, a rationalist and non-believer in all things occult and supernatural. See Lin Carter, *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos* (London: Panther, 1972) for a personal memoir of Lovecraft which stresses this strand of rationalism in the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. John Clute and Peter Nicholls stress the centrality of the trope of ‘conceptual breakthrough’: ‘…of all the forms which the quest for knowledge takes in modern SF, by far the most important…is conceptual breakthrough…’ John Clute and Peter Nicholls, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (London: Orbit, 1993), p. 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. James Holden and Simon King, *Conceptual Breakthrough: Two Experiments in SF Criticism* (London: InkerMen Press 2007)

     As the writer Adam Roberts (b. 1965) points out:

     ‘The great dome in which are embedded the stars turns out to be the inside of our own craniums. The breakthrough – Star Trek’s ‘final frontier’ – has more to do with the boundaries that hem our mundane existence…’

     Adam Roberts commentary upon his stories ‘Hieronimo’ and ‘Jerie’ in Adam Roberts, *Adam Robots* (London: Gollancz, 2013), pp. 246 – 55, pp. 255 – 9, commentary: pp. 260 – 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. There is an interesting series of discussions about transformation in various horror stories on film ed. by Stephane Malone at <https://morbidlybeautiful.com/theme-transformative-horror/> posted 23 April 2019 [accessed 7 July 2020] [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. John Gaskin, ‘Reality Within “Supernatural Tales”’, p. 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Artistic movements as diverse as Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Vorticism, Dada, Futurism and Surrealism might all be described as modernist, but certainly do not always share common aims, objectives or methodologies – indeed, some emerged in partly hostile reaction to earlier movements. The apocalypse itself is a theme which lends a particular resonance to much modernist writing, most likely deriving from the cataclysmic impact of the First World War 1914 – 1918. This is explored in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The Great War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1991). However, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially chapter 7, ‘The Apocalyptic in War Literature’, pp. 204 – 222, for an argument that the Great War also reinforced ‘traditionalist’ writings and slowed the ‘advance’ of modernism. Similar terms existed in theology (condemned by Pope Pius X in the encyclical *Pascendi* (1907)) and were applied to anti-establishment or anti-Government groups in Hispanophone and Lusaphone communities in South America, although the term later became applied to literary and artistic groups in these areas as well. See Francisco Salvetti, ‘Literary Modernism in Latin America’ at <https://franciscosalvetti.com/literary-modernism-latin-america> [accessed 10 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Modernism in the visual arts seems, by general consensus, to predate modernist literature: Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) famously claimed that: ‘On or about December 1910 human nature changed. All human relations shifted and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.’ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), although 1922 is sometimes claimed as the year that modernist literature became widely recognised. See footnote 270 below. For current purposes, it is also worth noting that 1922 saw the limited release of the film *Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauenshe,* (dir.F. W. Murnau) [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. See Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, ‘The Name and Nature of Modernism’ in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890 – 1930* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 19 – 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Literary modernism originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily emerging in Europe and North America, characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional manners and styles of writing.  This literary movement was motivated by conscious and overt attempts to ignore or overturn traditional modes of representation in order to express what were considered the new sensibilities of the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Ezra Pound, *Make it New! Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934) [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Herbert Read, *Art Now* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933) [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. C. S. Lewis, Cambridge University inaugural lecture, *De Descriptiore Temporum*, 1954. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. See Helen Gardner, Horst de la Croix, Richard G Tansey and Diane Kirkpatrick eds. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991) [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. See Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Examples in modernist literature include Eliot’s inclusion of footnotes to *The Waste Land* (1922) and historic references to earlier prose styles in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). See the entry ‘Modernism’ in David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 257 – 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Jerrold E. Hogle writes: ‘…on the face of it, modernity would seem at odds with ‘the Gothic’….[but we are] pulled retrogressively toward outmoded superstitions while also being open to more progressive thinking, like the two-faced god of ancient Rome…’ Jerrold E. Hogle ‘Introduction: Modernity and the Proliferation of the Gothic’, in Jerrold E Hogle ed*. The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 3 – 19, pp. 3 – 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. See Taryn Louise Norman, *Gothic Modernism: Revising and Representing the Narratives of History and Romance*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Tennessee, 2012, at <https://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2549&context=utk_graddiss> [accessed 10 April 2022] for a more detailed examination of this claim. Norman points out that: ‘… Gothic conventions and language include ghosts and haunted houses, vampires, succubi, incubi, monsters, witches, curses, nightmares, necrophilia, necromancy, possession, confinement, doppelgängers, somnambulists, the uncanny and more…’, p. 1. This is similar in scope to the analysis of Gothic themes for ‘census’ purposes discussed in Section 1.2 above, and in footnote 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Norman, *Gothic Modernism,* pp. 1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. ‘…the great majority of the present generation of novelists…have made psychology, consciousness and deliberate psychology, their engrossing interest, and it is natural that such an interest should entail their finding the older technique too clumsy for their new purpose…’ Elizabeth Drew, *The Modern Novel: Some Aspects of Contemporary Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1926), p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Norman, *Gothic Modernism,* p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. The term derives from William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1890). An outline of the development and application of ‘stream-of-consciousness’ is given in Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (London: Longman, rev. edn. 1998), especially Chapter Two, ‘Space’, pp. 16 – 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway (London: Hogarth Press, 1925); James Joyce, Ulysses (Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1922); Dorothy Richardson, Pilgrimage, **a** sequence novel comprising thirteen of what Richardson described as ‘chapters’, eleven of which were published separately: *Pointed Roofs* (1915), *Backwater* (1916), *Honeycomb* (1917), *The Tunnel* (1919), *Interim* (1919), *Deadlock* (1921), *Revolving Lights* (1923), *The Trap* (1925), *Oberland* (1927), *Dawn’s Left Hand* (1931), and *Clear Horizon* (1935). *Dimple Hill*, the 12th chapter appeared in 1938 in a four-volume omnibus under the [collective](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collective) title *Pilgrimage*. A decade after Richardson’s death in 1957, *Pilgrimage* was released in four volumes with the inclusion of the previously unpublished 13th book *March Moonlight*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pilgrimage-novel-by-Richardson> [accessed 10 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. See section 2.1 below, and further discussion in footnote 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Stephen King refers to stories of ‘inside evil’; psychological narratives that ‘…explore the terrain of the human heart.’ See: Stephen King, ‘The Genius of “The Tell-Tale Heart”‘ at <https://www.chino.k12.ca.us/cms/lib/CA01902308/Centricity/Domain/3749/8.2.1_The%20Genius%20of%20Poe.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2022], p.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. See Chapter 1, and footnote 42 above and then section 2, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. It is telling that Jackson’s autobiographical works, such as: [*Life Among the Savages: An Uneasy Chronicle*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_Among_the_Savages) (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953) [*Raising Demons*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_Demons) (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957) despite being quite light-hearted in tone generally, make reference in the titles to there being something dark and chaotic below the suburban normality they purport to portray. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Jackson writes passages revealing the thoughts of characters in a similar style, albeit without entirely abandoning punctuation:

     The knocking, Eleanor told herself…will go on down the hall, and it will go on and on to the end of the hall and turn and come back again, it will just go on and on the way it did before and then it will stop and we will look at each other and laugh and try to remember how cold we were, and the little swimming curls of fear on our backs…

     Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, p. 154

     It is one of Kings’s authorial trademarks to include stream-of-consciousness descriptions of characters’ thoughts, often italicised or in parentheses: An example of Jack Torrance’s thoughts as he begins to stalk his family through the Overlook:

     *Curiosity killed the cat my dear redrum, redrum my dear, satisfaction brought him back safe and sound…he knew that those things / are like scary pictures, they can’t hurt you, but oh my god / what big teeth you have grandma and is that a wolf in a BLUEBEARD suit*

     Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 202 [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. See section 1.2.1 in particular and the ‘Gothic recipe’. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Dorothy Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. See the seminal Rebecca Janicker, *The Literary Haunted House: Lovecraft, Matheson, King and the Horror in Between*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Ashleigh Prosser, ‘No Place Like Home: The Chronotope of the Haunted House in Peter Ackroyd’s *The House of Doctor Dee’,* in *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies,* Volume 2, Issue 1, June 2015, pp. 1 - 19, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Stephen King, ‘Crouch End’ in Stephen King, *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), pp. 410 – 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. It is such an important theme that it is possible to reference an entire sub-genre within a simple phrase. See, for example Dean Koontz, *The Bad Place*, and works at footnote 5, and within section 1.3.2 above. Perhaps even more indicative, especially to an audience likely to be genre-aware would be T. M. Wright, *The Place* (London: Gollancz Horror, 1989) [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. An excellent example is to be found in Kay Chronister, *Thin Places* (Pickering, ON: Undertow Publications, 2020), a collection of short stories set in ‘liminal locations’. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Jackson certainly since the late 1960s and King since the mid-1980s, quite possibly boosted by a decision in 1998 by his then-new publisher Scribner to remarket his books as ‘literary fiction’. See: Gustavo Vargas Cohen, ‘Shirley Jackson’s Critical Legacy: A Critical Commentary on the Literary Reception’, unpublished PhD thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2012; Ben Lindbergh ‘The King Chroniclers and the Reimagining of an Icon of American Letters’ (posted September 4, 2018) [accessed 2 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. A brief trawl of the internet yields a large number of courses with a focus upon either (or both) authors at Anglophone Universities: see <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/course/arts-and-humanities/short-courses/the-king-of-horror-what-we-can-learn-from-stephen-king-online> [accessed 12 April 2022] (University of Trent Nottingham); <https://www.uvm.edu/~dpelkey/syllabus.html> [accessed 12 April 2022] (University of Virginia); and an example of a lesson plan for high school classes on Jackson’s dystopian short story ‘The Lottery’ at <https://works.swarthmore.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1353&context=fac-english-lit>. see also Appendix F of Cohen ‘Shirley Jackson’s Critical Legacy’. Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ has even been used as pa part of apolitical science course. See: John P. Irish, ‘”The Lottery” and Locke’s Politics’, *Philosophy Now* no. 149, April / May 2022, pp. 10 - 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. A centre for Gothic Studies is established at Manchester Metropolitan University. See: <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/english/gothic-studies/> [accessed 12 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Stephanie Branson, ‘Shirley Jackson‘s *American Gothic*, by Darryl Hattenhauer’ (review) in *Reviews*, 2003

     (Platteville, WI: The University of Wisconsin 2003) pp. 416-417, p. 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Carolyn Siegel ‘Shirley Jackson‘s American Gothic, *Rocky Mountain E-Review of Language and Literature*, Volume 58, Number 2. Pullman, WA: Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Fall 2004, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Cohen references Chiho Nakagaua to this effect in Cohen, ‘Shirley Jackson’s Critical Legacy’, p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Keith Stanovich, ‘The world turned upside down: decentred thought as a goal of education’, The Jackson Lecture, University of Toronto 1 May 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Nasrullah Mambrol, ‘Analysis of Shirley Jackson’s Stories’, at <https://literariness.org/2020/04/24/analysis-of-shirley-jacksons-stories/> posted 24 April 2020 [accessed 12 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Most notably, towns which have featured in King’s stories include: Castle Rock, ‘Salem’s Lot, Haven, Chester’s Mill and Derry, malignant enough to act as a character in its own right. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Bernice Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (New York, NY:

     Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p. 256 [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Joan Hall, *Shirley Jackson: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p.75. Patrick McAleer, ‘Déjà vu Destroyed: On Stephen King’s *The Institute*’ at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/deja-vu-destroyed-on-stephen-kings-the-institute/> posted 12 October 2019 [accessed 12 April 2022] Both focus upon the clashes between generations, and in particular between generations of women. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Cohen, pp. 87-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Although Jackson appears to embrace conventional domesticity in her autobiographical works and King is on record as having serious qualms about writing from a female perspective. See Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, eds. *Kingdom of Fear* (New York, NY: Underwood Books, 1986), pp. 84-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. See Douglas Keesey ‘Patriarchal Mediations of *Carrie*; The Book, the Movie, and the Musical’, at <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1140&context=engl_fac> [accessed 12 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. S. T. Joshi, ‘John Langan: Tales from the Heart’ at <http://stjoshi.org/review_langan.html> [accessed 12 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901 /2), for example, might thus be counted as a tale of the supernatural, despite all elements ultimately having a ‘rational’ explanation. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London: George Newnes, 1902). The story was serialised in *The Strand Magazine* the previous year. The point is that the story cannot simply consist of a vignette of Luckhurst’s ‘furniture of the Gothic’ described above. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Even more difficult than presenting the ambiguity of *The Turn of the Screw* in print was the challenge of showing it in a stage play or on film – challenges taken up with some success by William Archibald (1917 – 1970), who wrote the play *The Innocents*, (opened on Broadway 1 February 1950) based on the James story. See William Archibald, *The Innocents* (London: Samuel French, 1950). The play was itself later adapted for film (directed by Jack Clayton (1921 – 1995), UK / US release 1961), with a script by Archibald and Truman Capote (1924 – 1984). I have also attempted to create a play from *The Turn of the Screw*, intending to produce a version in 2020, delayed by the onset of COVID-19 and the ensuing ‘lockdown’but eventually performed 31 March 2022 and 1 April 2022 at the Performing Arts Centres, Rishworth School. See Anthony Wilkins, *The Turn of the Screw*, adapted from the story by Henry James (unpublished, 2020) The ambiguities suggested in *The Shining* are examined in a little more detail in Section 2.2 – as a novel, the supernatural is the preferred option as an explanation – the Kubrick film version arguably has a greater focus upon the mental state of the protagonist. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Edward J. Parkinson offers an exhaustive review of the critical analyses of the story in ‘The Turn of the Screw: A History of Its Critical Interpretations 1898 – 1979’ at: <http://www.turnofthescrew.com/> and of particular note to this discussion is the third chapter, ‘Appartitionists v. Non-Apparitionists: 1934 – 1948’, at: <http://www.turnofthescrew.com/ch3.htm> Whilst some critics argue that the story is *about* sexual repression, an interesting view is taken by Sumia Hafidh, who points out that the apparitions appear at times of heightened sexual tension, without taking a position on the ontology of the ghosts themselves. See Sumia Hafidh, ‘Henry James: *The Turn of the Screw* – Ghost Story or Study in Libidinal Repression?’ at <http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/henry-james.html>, posted September 2006 [accessed 24 July 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. See Rob Ager, ‘Mazes, Mirrors, Deception and Denial’ at <http://www.collativelearning.com/the%20shining.html> posted 2008 [accessed 17 April 2019] See also Valdine Clemens, *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from ‘The Castle of Otranto’ to ‘Alien’* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), Chapter 8, ‘American Gothic: Historical and Psychological Critique in Stephen King’s *The Shining’,* pp. 185 – 212, p. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Made clear in correspondence with the author. See the extended quotation in section 2.3 regarding Langan’s intentions as he wrote the novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. An unreliable narrator is a [narrator](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrator), whether in literature, film, or theatre, whose credibility has been seriously compromised. The term was coined by [Wayne C. Booth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayne_C._Booth), *The Rhetoric of Fiction*[.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayne_C._Booth) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961) pp. 158–159. The ‘supernatural reveal’ of Ann Radcliffe is discussed above in section 1.2; see also footnote 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Lyotard refers to the destruction of ‘grand narrative’ as spawning multiple incommensurate ‘small narratives’ which he characterised, after Wittgenstein, as ‘language games’. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. See Shirley Jackson, *Hangsaman*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2013), p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. *Hangsaman*, p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Very much reflected in the way in which Jack Torrance’s mental state in *The Shining* decays in step with the deterioration of the weather outside of the Overlook, for example. Again, this inner / outer dichotomy and the nature of the boundary, is discussed at length in section 1.2; the boundary in more detail in section 1.3.2; the nature of the ways in which the boundary is violated at 1.3.6, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Brian J. Showers, ‘Grant Morrison’s Arkham Asylum and the Literary Tradition of the Haunted House’, *Wormwood: Literature of the Fantastic, Supernatural and Decadent*, Number 21, Autumn 2013, pp. 22 – 36, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Which is not to say that even such a writer of ‘cosmic horror’ as Lovecraft did not make use of extremes of geographical isolation as well: the inner regions of Antarctica in ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, the remote Pacific Ocean in ‘Call of Cthulhu’, abandoned graveyards in ‘The Statement of Randolph Carter’, the ‘…great southern desert of Arabia—the Roba el Khaliyeh or “Empty Space” of the ancients…’ in ‘The History of the Necronomicon’, exo-planets and so on. However, he also wrote about events in fictionalised versions of real-life Massachusetts locations such as Ipswich, Salem/Danvers, Marblehead, and Newburyport. See <http://lovecraft.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Locations> [accessed 12 April 2017]. A detailed geography of ‘Lovecraft Country’ is given in Kevin Ross & Shannon Appel eds., *Dead Reckonings* (Hayward, CA: Chaosium, 1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Veils themselves are something of a well-established trope – twice in Radcliffe, *The* *Mysteries of Udolpho*, the heroine Emily encounters a mysterious object hidden beneath a ‘black veil’, and the notion is used many times in subsequent works by later writers. See Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (London: Dent, 1962 [1794]). In section 2.2, there is an examination of the use of a similar metaphor by one of the protagonists in *The Shining.* In esoteric traditions, ‘the veil’ can mean the separation between life and death, or that ignorance which screens us from occult ‘truth’. See Gary Stamper, ‘The Lifting of the Veil’ at <https://wakeup-world.com/2013/04/22/the-lifting-of-the-veil/> [accessed 23 July 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. In Mary Shelley’s (1797 – 1851) *Frankenstein* (1818), this theme is explored: Frankenstein’s creature, in keeping with Shelley’s political and moral outlook, is created an innocent – it develops its murderous impulses due to being spurned by its creator, and only becomes a monster as a result of this abandonment and subsequent isolation. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: or, the Modern Prometheus* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818). As Jackson reminds us: ‘No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality…’ Hill House, p.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. *Hill House*, p. 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. *Hill House*, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. *The Supernatural*, p. 8. Works and writers discussed include: Radcliffe, T. J [or I]. Horsley- Curties’ (c. 1777 – 1858) *The Ancient Records of the Abbey of St. Oswyth*, Maturin, *Zofloya* (1806) by Charlotte Dacre (writing as Rose Matilda, c. 1771 – 1825) and *Zastrozzi* (1810) by Percy Shelley (1792 – 1822) [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Patrick McGrath and Bradford Morrow, ‘Introduction’, xi. See also W. Scott Poole, *Wasteland*: *The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. See Susan Beth Miller, *Emotions of Menace and Enchantment: Disgust, Horror, Awe and Fascination* (London: Routledge, 2017) and Matthias Clasen, *Why Horror Seduces (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)* [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ in *Poetry and Tales*, (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1984) See also <https://www.poemuseum.org/life.php> [accessed April 2016] This description creates a feeling very similar to that engendered in the description of Hill House, I believe. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Patrick McGrath and Bradford Morrow, ‘Introduction’, xi [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. William D. Prystack, ‘Home is Where the Horror Is’, in *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2012, pp. 26 – 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. I am referencing Ira Levin, *Rosemary’s Baby* (London: Pan, 1981). The story was filmed in 1968 as *Rosemary’s Baby*, dir. Roman Polanski (b. 1933), Paramount Pictures, 1968 using a technique of bright prints in *film verite* fashion. See the article ‘Versimilitude’ in Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell eds., *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 444. However, the imposing Dakota Building in New York was the model for the Bramford building (which has a suitably awful history and Gothic look) in the book. The Dakota was used for exterior shots in the subsequent film, and the Gothic credentials and appearance of *that* building cannot be denied. The Dakota (also known as Dakota Apartments) is an apartment building located on the northwest corner of [72nd Street](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/72nd_Street_(Manhattan)) and [Central Park West](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Park_West) in the [Upper West Side](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upper_West_Side) of [Manhattan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manhattan) in New York City. Constructed between October 25, 1880 and October 27, 1884, it was the residence of John Lennon (1940 – 1980) in the later 1970s and it was immediately outside this building that Lennon was murdered in 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Rosemary herself changes her mind several times during the course of the novel about exactly what it is that she is experiencing. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. “…her surrender…is worse than…[the death of the known and recognisable self]…amounting to an erasure…the essential, inner Rosemary is no more…” Peter Straub, ‘Rosemary at 50: An Introduction’, in *Cemetery Dance* #76, December 2017, pp. 44-6, p. 46. All that remains of Rosemary’s essential self is her motherhood, which we have to view here as being morally neutral. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. I am referencing the 1963, film tie-in second edition of the book: Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (London: Four Square, 1963) [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Steven Bruhm, ‘Contemporary Gothic: Why we Need It’ in Hogle ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, pp. 259 – 76, p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Robert Wise, dir., *The Haunting*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1963 US release. See also Nelson Gidding and Tom Weaver, ‘Nelson Gidding’ in Tom Weaver ed. *I Was a Monster Movie Maker: Conversations with 22 SF and Horror Filmmakers* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001). A later film incarnation, dir., Jan de Bont, *The Haunting*, Dreamworks, 1999 US release, suffers from no such possible ambiguity. Again, one is reminded of the natural / supernatural tension created by our unstable, and thus unreliable, characters. See also the discussion surrounding the differing interpretations of works such as *The Turn of the Screw* above, particularly at footnote 269, and concerning Kubrick’s interpretation of *The Shining*, in section 2.2, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Dale Bailey, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), pp. 25 – 45, p. 28. See also Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1988) [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. The ‘dispossessed, dislocated’ female character is a staple of Jackson’s works. See Dianne Hoeveler, ‘Life Lessons in Shirley Jackson’s Late Fiction: Ethics, Cosmology, Eschatology’ in Bernice Murphy ed*. Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2005), pp. 267 – 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Irving Malin, *The New American Gothic* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), quoted in *American Nightmares*, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. *The Haunting of Hill House*, p. 5, and p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. *Haunting of Hill House*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. *Haunting of Hill House*, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. *Haunting of Hill House*, p. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. *Haunting of Hill House*, p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. *Haunting of Hill House*, p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. *Haunting of Hill House*, p. 185. The character of Eleanor in *No Man* reflects, in many important ways, Eleanor Vance. This is expanded upon in section 4.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. *Haunting of Hill House*, p. 190. See also section 4.1 below for further relevance in the writing of *No Man*. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Predominantly female characters begin to lose significant parts of their identity – to take one example, the protagonist in ‘Louisa, Please Come Home’ is a runaway, who returns home only to find that her parents don’t believe it is really her (or so they say). She finally walks away, saying: ‘I hope your daughter comes home one day…’ Shirley Jackson, ‘Louisa, Please Come Home’ in *Dark Tales* (London: Penguin, 2016) pp. 12 -29, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. An interesting insight is provided by author Josh Malerman, who has stated that just as setting became character, so in recent times, horror itself has become character in recent works. Josh Malerman, comments in a mediated on-line panel, *At Home with Literati: Joe Hill & Josh Malerman* online panelfromMorrow Group PR, 15 April 2020 [accessed 15 April 2020] – arguably, completing the incorporation of the ‘furniture of the Gothic’ into modern life, [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. *Haunting of Hill House*, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Yuppie: a young, ambitious, and well-educated city-dweller who has a professional career and/or an affluent lifestyle. A id 1980s neologism originating in the United States of America-; *y(oung) u(rban) p(rofessional)*+ [-ie](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/-ie) [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. It does, of course, speak to the very real fears of any young new parent that their psyches are set to be subsumed in the all-encompassing role of parenthood. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Much of Levin’s other work is concerned with exploring similar issues of identity. In Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York, NY: Random House, 1972) Joanna Eberhart, a young mother, moves to the seemingly idyllic town of Stepford but begins to suspect that the ‘perfect’ housewives in their new neighborhood are in fact robots. What essential character must be surrendered to be a ‘good wife’? Arguably, *The Boys from Brazil* (New York, NY: Random House, 1976) is also primarily concerned with questions of defining identity, as cloned individuals lead very different lives from their infamous ‘donor’ – except possibly one. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. *The Shining*, p. 398 [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Marcel Brion, quoted in Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 22. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. This interplay between ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ elements in the stories under discussion is treated rather neatly in King’s *Danse Macabre,* who also frames the tension in political conservative / liberal terms*.* It may seem that there is an allure in the anarchic, but the tale of the supernatural is perhaps, at base, quite a conservative beast and seeks to remind us that the thrill of total freedom might be short-lived as set against the horror of existing in a world without physical or moral boundaries. See also footnote 137, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. George Bataille, *Literature and Evil* trans. by Alastair Hamilton. This is echoed in the next section also. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Danny comes to characterise his ability as ‘shining’ after meeting fellow ‘shine’ Dick Hallorann, the head chef at the Overlook Hotel. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. ‘Ghost: the disembodied spirit or image of a deceased person, appearing to be alive’ J. Gordon Melton ed., *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, 4th edn. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research 1996), Vol. 1 p. 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Critical analysis of his works is increasingly part of University courses – such as: The Stephen King's Fiction module (EN11016) at the University of Dundee, with a focus upon a range of works: *Carrie* (1974), *The Shining* (1977), *The Dead Zone* (1979), '1922' (in Full Dark, No Stars) (2010), *Christine* (1983), *Pet Sematary* (1986)’ 'Summer Thunder' (in Bazaar Of Bad Dreams) (2015), *Misery* (1987), *If It Bleeds* (2020). See <https://www.dundee.ac.uk/module/en11016> [accessed 11 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Stanley Kubrick, dir. *The Shining*, 1980. Warner Brothers, general film release. 144 minutes (USA). See the arguments about ‘supernaturalism’ v. ‘naturalism’ recounted above in section 2.1, and *passim*. Stephen King is on record as suggesting that he was dissatisfied with this downplaying, feeling that, amongst other weaknesses, it portrayed Jack Torrance as a less sympathetic character than King intended; [Stephen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_King) King (interviewee), Laurent Bouzerau (writer, director, producer) (2011). *A Night at the Movies: The Horrors of Stephen King* (Television production), [Turner Classic Movies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turner_Classic_Movies). [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. James Berardinelli (February 18, 2009). ["The Shining (1980)"](http://www.reelviews.net/php_review_template.php?identifier=1482). REELVIEWS.com. Uploaded December 23, 2010 [accessed 7 July 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. An interpretation which would not make a lot of narrative sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Berardinelli, *op. cit.* [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. See Harlan Kennedy, ‘Kubrick Goes Gothic’, *American Film*, Vol. 5, No. 8 (1980), 49-52 [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. It is worth pointing out that there is also a made-for-TV version of the story, scripted by King, which is more faithful to his original story. Mick Garris, dir., *The Shining*, TV mini-series, Lakeside Productions and [Warner Bros. Television](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warner_Bros._Television), US release 1997. An articles exploring King’s dissatisfaction with Kubrick’s film is: Nicholas Brooks, ‘Why Stephen King Hates Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining’*, at <https://www.cbr.com/why-stephen-king-hates-stanley-kubrick-shining/> posted 3 July2021 [accessed 11 April 2022] [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. This ‘thinning’ of the human population, with subsequent loss of a ‘consensus reality’ which strengthens the hand of the evil entity within the ‘thin place’, plays an important structural part in my novel *No Man*, as described in chapter 3, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Valdine Clemens in *The Return of the Repressed* puts forward a Jungian analysis that explains in greater detail how Danny maintains a greater integrity of personality. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 85. Clemens views Hallorann as referencing a Jungian ‘race consciousness’ in his explanation to Danny of the ‘shining’- in its way, also an alternative to our usual view of personal identity; *The Return of the Repressed,* p. 198. This is treated again in relation to My own work in *No Man* in the final section. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. The real world may usually be dense enough to support us all, along with our social *mores* and physical laws, but in certain places, and under the right conditions - ‘when the stars are right’ - our reality becomes perilously thin, and with the least ‘push’ (such as would be provided in this case by Danny Torrance’s psychic power), it may rupture altogether. Quote from H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ in *The Call of Cthulhu and other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 139 – 69, p. 155 [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. In nine books, from 1982 – 2012 The books which form the ‘main sequence’ of the Dark Tower books are (in order of the narrative action, not publication): Stephen King, *The Gunslinger* (New York, NY: Grant, 1982); Stephen King, *The Drawing of the Three* (New York, NY; Grant, 1987); Stephen King, *The Waste Lands* (New York, NY: Grant, 1991); Stephen King, *Wizard and Glass* (New York, NY: Grant, 1997); *The Wind Through the* *Keyhole* (New York, NY: Grant, 2012); Stephen King, *Wolves of the Calla* (New York, NY: Grant, 2003); Stephen King, *Song of Susannah* (New York, NY: Grant, 2004); Stephen King, *The Dark Tower* (New York, NY: Grant, 2004). The stories which constitute the chapters of the first novel were originally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* from 1978 through to 1981. The first book was republished in a much revised edition to ‘tie-in’ better to the rest of the series, as Stephen King, *The Gunslinger* (New York, NY: Grant, rev. edn. 2003) [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. These areas play an important part in the series as a whole, but in particular in Stephen King, *The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass* (New York, NY: Grant, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 319. See also section 2 for a brief indication of how this trope originated historically and footnote 294 which traces explicit uses of the term in King’s short story, ‘Crouch End’. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Dale Bailey makes a case for a distinctive sub-genre of haunted house stories, with a different demographic and popularity cycle from ‘other’ works of the supernatural. See *American Nightmares*, p. 54. There is an echo of the ‘Gothic recipe’ in section 1.2.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. As Bailey takes to be exemplified in Jay Anson, *The Amityville Horror* (New York, NY: Prentice Hall, 1977) [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Dale Bailey, *American Nightmare*, p. 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. See Eve Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980) [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Commentators from Bailey, to Stephen King through to Grady Hendrix also point out that these modern tales of American haunted houses also have a strong element of ‘financial horror’: Hendrix writes that Marasco in *Burnt Offerings* ‘…focussed on the real issue for most people with a haunted house: “Can I get my investment back?”’, Grady Hendrix, *Paperbacks from Hell: The Twisted History of ‘70s and ‘80s Horror Fiction* (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2017). See also section 1.3.6 above. Jackson explicitly states that Hill House is an ‘organism’ *Hill House*, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. See Aspasia Stephanou, *Reading Vampire Gothic Through Blood* (London: MacMillan Palgrave Gothic Bloodlines 2014), especially Chapter 1, ‘A Matter of Life and Death: Transfusing Blood from a Supernatural Past to Scientific Modernity and Vampiric Technology’, pp. 21-46 [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. This in turn raises an interesting question: how would humanity, self-proclaimed ‘husbanders’ of the natural world, be perceived by other living things in the world, given our record of extermination, exploitation, destruction, pollution and cruelty? The notion is explored in Tim Lebbon, *The Nature of Balance* (London: Leisure Books, 2001). The question is answered within this story in terms most unfavourable for (what remains of) humanity. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. This brings to mind the sub-genre of ‘body horror’, which again has ancient roots, becoming foregrounded *per se* in *Grand Guignol*, as discussed in section 1.3.3 above. More recent manifestations have included work by authors as diverse as H. G. Wells (1866 – 1946) with H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (London: Heinemann, 1896),; and Franz Kafka (1883 – 1924) with *The Metamorphosis*; Franz Kafka, *Der Verwandlung* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1915). Arguably, a current descended from this tradition was the ‘video nasty’. This was a [colloquial](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colloquialism) term originally coined and used in the [United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom) to refer to a number of [films](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film) distributed originally on [video cassette](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Videotape),  criticised in some quarters for their violent content by sections of the press, some (mainly right-of-centre) social commentators and various religious organisations. These video releases were not presented to the [British Board of Film Classification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Board_of_Film_Classification) (BBFC) due to a [loophole](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loophole) in film classification laws that allowed straight-to-video releases to bypass the review process undertaken with cinema releases. The term was popularised by the [National Viewers' and Listeners' Association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediawatch-uk) (NVALA) in the UK in the early 1980s. A list of prosecuted material can be found at: [Celestron1980](https://www.imdb.com/user/ur29766420/?ref_=_usr), ‘Video Nasties, The Complete 72 Banned Titles List with Details and Anecdotes’, at: <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls051364249/>posted13 April 2013 | updated 1 May 2013 [accessed 19 April 2019] In *Hill House*, Eleanor is simultaneously disgusted and excited by the idea that she exists ‘within’ the living house. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. ‘Lifting the Veil’ was the term used for the processes purportedly taking place in spiritualist meetings and séances, thus ‘the veil’ was that boundary separating life and death. See Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story 1840 – 1920: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), especially chapter 5, ‘Reading Ghosts and reading Texts: Spiritualism’, pp. 97 – 119. See also footnote 324 for more information on this notion. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. For Jung, the distinction between conscious and unconscious material, is not a fixed boundary but ‘…a threshold of intensity…’ Carl Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, trans. R. F. C Hull (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. In the film of *The Shining*, Kubrick has the manager, Ullman, tell the Torrances that the Overlook is built upon an Indian burial ground. Some have taken this line in the film as being a part of Kubrick’s wider social comment on treatment of the American indigenous peoples: ‘Fans found it surprising in 1980 when Kubrick turned out a movie that was apparently no more than a horror film. The action took place at the Overlook Hotel in Colorado, where the winter caretaker, as played by Jack Nicholson (b. 1937), became progressively more insane and tried to murder his wife and his telepathic son. But *The Shining* is not really about the murders at the Overlook Hotel. It is about the murder of a race - the race of Native Americans - and the consequences of that murder.’ Bill Blakemore ‘The Family of Man’, originally 1987, at <http://www.drummerman.net/shining/essays.html> [accessed 30April 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. King has completed a series of short stories, almost vignettes, to describe the early history of the Overlook, but eschews any ready answer to the question of the origin of the Overlook’s malignancy. Stephen King, ‘Before the Play’ in Stuart David Schiff ed. *Whispers*: *Stephen King Special Issue*, Vol 5 no. 1/2 (whole no. 17/18): August 1982 [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. *Literature and Evil*, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. *The Shining*, p. 215. However it is worth reminding that we, as readers, know something that Jack does not – namely that Danny *can* still communicate, telepathically, with fellow ‘shine’ Dick Halloran, so the isolation is *not* complete. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. ‘…if a wife secretly – and not so secretly - believes her teetotaling husband is a drunk…’, *The Shining*, p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. *The Shining,* pp. 201 – 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Bentley Little, interview with David B. Silva in *Cemetery Dance Magazine* 64, 2010, pp. 7 – 11, Little tells Silva, ‘…the solution to the complex horrors that have gone on before is for Danny and his mother to blow up the hotel…’, p.9. This is further investigated in relation to the isolation suffered by characters in my novel *No Man*, in section 3.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Jack considers what careers might be available if they abandoned his post in the Overlook: ‘…A man with his sterling record of alcoholism, student-beating and ghost-chasing would undoubtedly be able to write his own ticket…swamping out Greyhound buses…washing cars in a rubber suit…washing dishes in a diner…’ *The Shining*, p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 357 [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. ‘…[Danny] loved his mother but he was his father’s boy…’ *The Shining*, p. 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. There are interesting parallels with the opera by Bela Bartók, *Bluebeard’s Castle*, with the composer actually including the castle itself on the *Dramatis Personae*. See: *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* [Christa Ludwig, Walter Berry, London Symphony Orchestra, Istvn Kertsz](https://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_music_1?ie=UTF8&field-artist=Christa+Ludwig%5EWalter+Berry%5ELondon+Symphony+Orchestra%5EIstvn+Kertsz&search-alias=music), Decca, 1965. The story of Bluebeard is also referenced by Danny Torrance in *The Shining*: he remembers the gist of the story as he struggles against the temptation to enter Room 217:  
     ‘It seemed vaguely to Danny that the story had had a happy ending, but that paled to insignificance beside the two dominant images: the taunting, maddening locked door with some great secret behind it, and the grisly secret itself […]. The locked door, and behind it the heads, the severed heads.’ *The Shining*, p. 161. Kidd points out that temptation (like tyranny) is a central motif of the Gothic. Robert Kidd, ‘Gothic’ at: http://opac.iwcollege.ac.uk/opacreq.dll [accessed 8 April 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 376 [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Stephen King, *The Shining*, p. 392 [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. I am indebted to a sequence of communications by e-mail with John Langan over a period from April 2015 to the present, during which time he generously corresponded on many topics concerning both the field of ‘horror’ literature and his contributions to this field in general, and *House of Windows* specifically. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. John Langan, *House of Windows* (San Francisco, CA: Night Shade Books, 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Langan’s protagonists are often themselves lecturer on Gothic authors – sometimes even fictionalised versions of himself and other contemporaries, as in John Langan ‘Slippage’, *NeCon 37 Program Book*, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. John Langan, ‘Greetings from across the Pond (6)’, e-mail message to Anthony Wilkins, 23 July 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. *House of Windows*, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. *House of Windows*, p. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. *House of Windows*, p.144 [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Simon Hay notes that it is a common features of many such ‘places’ in the literature of the supernatural that ‘…they seem to distort perception…act as an unreliable lens…and from the other side of which may emerge themes only previously apprehended in a dream.’ Simon Hay, *Form, Place and Memory: Materialist Readings of Iain Sinclair’s London Writing*, unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Manchester, p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. One reason sometimes advanced to explain King’s commercial success is that his stories are written in a cinematic style, easing movie adaptation. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982) [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. David Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void* (np: Schism Press, 2014), p. 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Victoria, Australia: re.press, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. John Langan, ‘Story Notes’ in John Langan, *Sefira and Other Betrayals* (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2019), pp. 331 – 48, p. 332 [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. *The Shining*, p. 277 - 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. *House of Windows*, p. 192 [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. ‘…consensus…the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the…world…’ Stuart Allan, *News Culture* (Buckinghamshire: Open University Press, 1999), p. 85-6. See also Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937), *Selections form the Prison Notebooks* (New York, NY: International, 1971). ‘You cannot learn, through common sense, how things are: you can only discover where they fit into the existing scheme of things…’ Stuart Hall (1932 – 2014), ‘Culture, the media and the “ideological effect”’ in J. Curran, H. Gurevitch and J. Woollacott eds. *Mass Culture and Society* (London: Arnold, 1977), pp.320 – 51, p. 325 [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Langan has written a story, ‘Aphanisis’, writing ‘I borrowed the title…from poststructural theory, which has used it to refer to the disappearance of the self.’ John Langan, ‘Story Notes’ in John Langan, *Children of the Fang and Other Genealogies* (Petaluma, CA: Word Horde, 2020), p. 369. Stephen King explicitly explored the notion that there may be something worse than death awaiting us at the end of life – a form of eternal suffering not reserved, as purportedly in Judeo-Christian tradition, for the wicked, but for everyone. See, Stephen King, *Revival* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner and Sons, 2014). Ontological horror is discussed above in the Introduction, with some definitional material in footnote 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. John Langan, *The Fisherman* (New York, NY: Word Horde, 2016), p. 119, p. 134, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Robert Marasco, *Burnt Offerings* (London: Coronet, 1977), p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. *Burnt Offerings,* pp. 80 – 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. There is an element of ambiguity, however. There is a framing mechanism fused or the story-within-a-story that hints that maybe we need to treat Veronica’s narrative as untrustworthy, as we see her story being recounted through the eyes of a sceptical listener. See also the discussion in section 2.1, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. *American Nightmares*, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. The phrase ‘economic horror story’ is King’s, *Danse Macabre* p. 163, in his discussion of the film version of *The Amityville Horror*, pp. 163 – 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. *No Man* is the creative writing component of the degree. When discussing the story I will refer to Anthony Wilkins, *No Man* (Ripponden: Bleak House, 2020) as well as to the material put forward for the degree. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Both Jackson’s Eleanor and my character come from a background in which they have had to care for an elderly parent, and have thus been forced to sublimate other feelings to that end: possibly resulting in co-dependency relationship: ‘a need to be needed’. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. In the past this has sometimes been characterised as ‘Asperberger’s Syndrome’. It is important to view this positively, as explained below. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Investigated in a little more detail in sections 3.2 and 4.1, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. The dramatis personae thus fall into the ‘family trope’ familiar in ‘haunted place’ tales: the Torrance family in *The Shining*, the pseudo-family in *The Haunting of Hill House* and the family created by the recent marriage in *House of Windows* (albeit that the child in this case is dead). This is explored in relation to the texts examined in section 2.1, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. See section 1.2.1 above, and in particular footnote 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. For an explanation, history and analysis of the term ‘Celtic fringe’ see Steven Ellis, ‘Why the History of ‘the Celtic Fringe’ Remains Unwritten’ at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1350748032000140778?journalCode=cerh20> posted 3 June 2010 [accessed 10 April 2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. A question dealt with in a little more detail in section 3.2, below, with specific reference to this story. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. In the sense that John Langan identifies for Belvedere House in his novel, *House of Windows*. See section 2.3, above, especially the extended quotation from my correspondence with John Langan. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. This is made explicit in conversation between Mike and Alex in *No Man* chapter 43, pp. 283 – 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. The notion that there are ‘holes’ in the fabric of reality is long-established in what might be described as urban folklore. Ambrose Bierce (1842 – c. 1914) wrote a newspaper article, published in 1888, and probably intended to be read as fiction, which detailed three cases of ‘disappearance into thin air’ drawing upon an idea previously circulating that claimed that there were areas of the world where people could fall into ‘holes’ or gaps. It seems that the literary and folkloric concepts have influenced each other, the one arising and informing the other and then becoming influenced in turn by some ‘mutation’ in the former. Ambrose Bierce (1842 – c. 1914) ‘Whither? Some Strange Instances of Mysterious Disappearances’, *San Francisco Examiner*, 14 December 1888 See also ‘Cosmic Holes’ in *The New York Times*, 30 November 1884. This is discussed in Theo Paijmans, ‘Vanished from the Face of the Earth’, *Fortean Times* 392, May 2020, pp. 34 -5. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. David Peak, *The Spectacle of the Void,* p. 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. *No Man*, chapter 44, pp. 296 – 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. *No Man* chapters 47 and 48*,* pp. 314 – 23, chapter 52, pp. 335 – 36. It could be argued that in ‘horror story’ terms, having even such a choice constitutes a ‘happy ending’, as it shows that there is something left of the ‘self’ which is still left able to make such choices. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. See the comments made by John Langan, quoted in section 2.3, above, concerning both horror literature’s self-reflexive tendencies, and on ‘thin-ness’. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Gregory Miller, *The Uncanny Valley: Tales from a Lost Town* (Pittsburgh, PA: West Arcadia Press, 2014) e-book, location 325 of 1690. There are a great many other possible examples in very recent years with ‘thin-ness’ in story titles or referenced with minimal explanation: Michelle Paver’s ghost story, *Thin Air* (London: Orion, 2016); C. K. Walker, *Cold, Thin Air* (USA: Amazon Print on Demand, 2016), the above mentioned (in footnote 266) Kay Chronister, *Thin Places* and more. Gemma Files, ‘The Harrow’ in Ross E. Lockhart and Justin Steele eds., *The Children of Old Leech: A Tribute to the Carnivorous Cosmos of Laird Barron*, (Petaluma, CA: Word Horde, 2014): ‘The earth is old and full of holes…Its crust is thin…just thin ice [and we are] waiting for it to thaw and crack.’ pp. 5 – 24, p.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. See Sean M. Thompson interview with John Langan at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnlRHZe0tug> [accessed 30 April 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. <http://www.stdunstans.org.uk/> [accessed 26 July 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. The island and the surrounding environment is described in detail in Hamish Haswell-Smith, *The Scottish Islands* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, rev. edn. 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. <http://cms4.border-net.co.uk/> [accessed 12 April 2016]. The company ceased trading as of 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. For information on ‘Outward Bound’, see <https://www.outwardbound.org.uk/> [accessed 26 July 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. For an example of ‘living off the land’ (or, at least, aiming so to do) see the blog by Ross Gilmore at <http://woodtrekker.blogspot.co.uk/> [accessed 12 July 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. The major mobile network operators publish coverage maps, which all seem to substantiate this statement. See, for example the map produced by Three, at: <http://www.three.co.uk/Discover/Network/Coverage?id=1681&awc=10210_1559127687_9831ca741bb94bbbdf662ad479000f59&aidset=1> [accessed 29 May 2019] The spread of the necessary mobile phone masts is slow, as it seems that they have to be financed, and subsequently maintained by the local population which is, of course, small. See OFCOM, *Connected Nations* at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/130821/Connected-Nations-2018-Scotland.pdf> [accessed 29 May 2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. See Catie Disabato, ‘Why Don’t They Just Leave? Revisiting *The Haunting of Hill House’* at <http://www.full-stop.net/2012/10/31/features/catie-disabato/why-dont-they-just-leave-revisiting-the-haunting-of-hill-house/> [accessed 23 July 2016] See also the discussions in sections 2.1 and 2.2 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. See, for example: M. J. Steel Collins, ‘Sgeulachdan: Tales from The Scottish Highlands and Hebridean Islands’ at <http://folklorethursday.com/regional-folklore/sgeulachdan-tales-scottish-highlands-hebridean-islands/#sthash.G0eGxRz8.dpbs> [accessed 18 July 2017], also <http://www.tracscotland.org/traditional-arts/storytelling/about-storytelling/storytelling-in-scotland> [accessed 25 July 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Simon Sylvester, *The Visitors* (London: Quercus, 2014) creates a story which itself revolves around Hebridean story-tellers, murder and the (possible) appearance of selkies, the human/seal shapeshifters of Scottish mythological lore. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. As mentioned above in section 1.4, as regards to the modernist influences on the literature, such self-reference seems inextricably entwined with both modernism as a series of movements and with the literatures we are examining. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. A very good example is to be found in John Langan, ‘Technicolor’ in John Langan, *The Wide, Carnivorous Sky and other Monstrous Geographies* (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press, 2013), pp. 55 – 84. The narrator is (like Langan himself) a lecturer in Gothic Studies, and in the story is itself structured as a lecture about Poe’s ‘Fall of the House of Usher’ which begins to take on a darker relevance as the lecture progresses. Rather more prosaically, Bentley Little says: ‘One thing I’ve noticed over the past twenty years or so is what a bunch of self-involved navel-gazers horror writers are.’ Interview, p.8. Whilst other genres may have a similar tradition, it does seem strong in the horror-writing community. See discussion at section 1.3.4, and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. See the discussion on the ‘New Gothic’ in section 1, above, which will also point to an explanation of where I would seek to place *No Man*. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from LeFanu to Blackwood* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980) [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Elizabeth Hand, ‘Introduction’ in John Langan, *Mr Gaunt and Other Uneasy Encounters* (Germantown, MD: Prime Books, 2008). The great proponent of the ‘antiquarian’ story was, of course, M. R. James. See section 1.2 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Stephen King, commenting on Arthur Machen, *The* *Great God Pan* (the inspiration for King’s own short story ‘N’) describes this latter conception as being ‘…a monster-filled macroverse.’ Stephen King ’Messages From Stephen’ (2008-09-04) <http://stephenking.com/stephens_messages.html> [accessed 2 August 2017] See Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan* and *The Inmost Light* (London: John Lane, 1894), and Stephen King, ‘N.’ in Stephen King, *Just After Sunset* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2008), pp. 177-228 [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. W. Scott Poole, *Wasteland* [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. See footnote 5, above, for some descriptions of ‘ontological horror’, and the Introduction for Joel Lane’s pithy conceptualisation. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Discussed in the Thompson / Langan interview, for example, and as noted in the preceding section of this essay, concerning the number of writers within the genre (s) who have written *about* the genre, from H. P. Lovecraft through Stephen King to Dale Bailey. See also section 1.3.5 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. A feature further discussed in the Thompson / Langan interview, for example. Langan himself disputes this (see section 1.3.4, above). His story notes in *Children of the Fang* pp.357 -72, however, demonstrate very detailed linkages between his own works and those of other authors in the genre. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. ‘Case Study: The Horror Genre’ at <http://cw.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415448239/downloads/horror.pdf> [accessed 11 August 2016]. For a discussion of this re-invention in British cinema, mirroring the ‘boom and bust’ cycles of the literature, see Jonathan Rigby, *English Gothic: Classic Horror Cinema 1897 – 2015* rev. edn., (Cambridge: Signum Books, 2017). Exactly parallel arguments exist for the written form, I contend. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. ‘…a device, principle, procedure or form …through which there is an agreement between the writer…and readers…which allows various freedoms and restrictions…’ See‘Convention’ *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms*, pp. 178 – 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. John Langan is specific: ‘…it has been my ongoing desire to make my way through the tropes and traditions of the horror field – as well as…to see what happens when you bring those tropes into contact with narrative techniques drawn from the length and breadth of literary history. (Which to be sure, is nothing new in horror…)’ John Langan, *The Wide, Carnivorous Sky and other Monstrous Geographies*, ‘Story Notes’, pp. 301 – 14, p. 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. *Hill House*, p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. *No Man*, chapter 2, pp. 7 - 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. John Langan, e-mail correspondence. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. These differing areas of ‘remoteness’ are explored in section 1.2 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Stoker, often viewed as an arch proponent of the later Gothic, in fact introduced what was contemporaneously a very modern feel into *Dracula*, with its locomotives, phonographs and other newly invented technology. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. ‘…one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe…’, Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1897), p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. *Dracula*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. *No Man*, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. See Troy Boone, ‘ “He is English and Therefore Adventurous”: Politics, Decadence, and Dracula, *Studies in the Novel* 25 (1993), pp. 76 – 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. *No Man*, chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Botting, *Gothic*, p. 97. See also Matthew Gibson, ‘Dracula and the East’, in Roger Luckhurst, *The Cambridge Companion to Dracula* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 95 – 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Mark Kermode, BBC Television. Nick Freand Jones dir.: [*Mark Kermode's Secrets of Cinema: Horror*](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bfp4h7)*,*at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3sH9vRz4Lbq58dtyjRB0Kvx/the-fright-stuff-what-makes-horror-movies-tick?intc_type=singletheme&intc_location=arts&intc_campaign=iplayer&intc_linkname=article_frightstuff_contentcard27> Broadcast 14 August 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. *No Man* p. 294. In the final version, this is implicit:

     Mike looked at his companion thoughtfully. “Here, the reality is….I don’t know how to describe it…*Thinner*. Maybe that’s the best word for it. Everything feels brittle here, like one picture painted on top of another, the layers slowly peeling away.”

     The image appealed to Alex, the idea taking on a light and comforting glow.

     “And we came along with all our worries, our histories…our little *secrets*. Then somehow it uses our weaknesses...our past…” [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. *No Man*, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. *No Man*, Chapter 3. I was also aware of the power of a story set entirely in isolation, so eventually decided to rewrite the chapter in flashback, as a memory of Mike’s once he was already on the island. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. ‘[Wendy] was afraid the bug [their VW car] wouldn’t make it up and down all these mountains and that they would get stranded by the side of the road…’ *The Shining*, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Belvedere House is ‘…a striking mansion whose features suggest a face hidden just out of view…’, *House of Windows* review at <http://www.nightshadebooks.com/cart.php?m=product_detail&p=139> [accessed 12 April 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. As features of fantasy, ‘quest’ stories, for example, such as in Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings.* [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. This notion of consensus reality can perhaps be described in terms introduced by D. C. Hallin, who envisages three concentric spheres of ‘credibility’: a sphere of consensus at the centre within which lie issues as being beyond dispute, a second sphere of ‘legitimate controversy’, and beyond that a ‘sphere of deviance’ in which are placed all those views ‘…unworthy of being heard’. See D. C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1986), p. 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. See Raman Selden, *Practising Theory and Reading Literature* (London: Harvester 1989), Chapter 3, ‘Structuralism’, pp. 47 – 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Anthony Wilkins unpublished *Dream Journal* Volume 2, 3 January 2009 – 31 December 2015, dream recorded 17 October 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Perhaps most faithfully reflected in *No Man*, chapters 26 and 27, pp. 175 – 88 which takes place on the mainland. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. In sections 2.2 and 3.1, above, for example, [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. See section 2.2. *passim*, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. In *No Man* chapter 17, pp. 123-6, chapter 48, pp. 3318-23 and chapter 47, pp. 314 – 7 respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Adam Nevill (b. 1969) writes: “The cave itself is another powerful symbol…The cave features a timeless dark…[hiding] things beyond modernity and its sophistications…far older than Christianity, and often beyond our understanding of good and evil.” Adam Nevill, ‘Made in England: An Introduction to *Albion Fey’* in Mark Morris, *Albion Fey* (London: Snowbooks, 2016), pp. i – x, p. viii. See also the discussion of ‘the underground’ in section 1.1. and the long history of the chthonic in the literature under discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. See the discussion around the Marabar caves in section 1, in section 1.3.4, and with references given in footnote 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. *No Man*, p. 124 [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. These competing narratives demarcating the story self-consciously as postmodern. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. Mike views the three of them as ‘…a parody of the nuclear family.’ *No Man*, p. 263, having already characterised Eleanor’s defence of Alex as being that of ‘…all good mothers, covering up for her baby’s shortcomings.’ *No Man*, p. 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. I very much hope that the depiction of Alex in *No Man* reflects my belief that his ‘condition’ should cause him to be seen as being ‘differently-abled’, not ‘dis-abled’. To quote from the website <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml> [accessed 26 July 2017] ‘Strengths and abilities may include: Having above-average intelligence – the CDC [reports](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html) 46% of ASD children have above average intelligence; being able to learn things in detail and remember information for long periods of time; being strong visual and auditory learners; exceling in math, science, music, or art.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. In *No Man*, Alex has an extremely developed mathematical ability, combined with, or arising from, a variety of synesthesia, enabling Alex to manipulate number as colours, a condition described as chromesthesia. See Brady Haran, *Numberphile: Seeing Numbers as Colours*, at Mathematical Research Institute, <http://www.numberphile.com/videos/synesthesia.html> [accessed 21 January 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. Baudrillard developed theories in which the relentless societal search for ‘true and complete’ knowledge leads almost inevitably to a species of delusion. He argued that full comprehension of human life is not possible, and that when people are seduced into thinking otherwise they become drawn toward a ‘simulated’ version of reality, which he denoted as ‘hyper-reality’. This is not to say that the world becomes unreal, but rather that the faster and more comprehensively societies attempt to coalesce reality into one supposedly coherent picture, the more insecure and unstable it becomes. Reality, in this sense, ‘dies out’. Thus the exotic world of literary theory closes comfortably with the esoteric themes of horror literature. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (London: Verso, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. See Denise Roman, ‘Poststructuralism’ in Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist eds. *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 308 – 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. That concept that language can define reality is well established, if contentious – one serious consideration was advanced in the notion of linguistic relativity, which holds that the structure of a [language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language) has an impact upon the world-view or cognitive processes of the language users. Often called the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, the principle offers two versions: the *strong* version holds that language *determines* thought, and that linguistic categories determine (and thus also limit) cognitive categories; whereas the *weak* version holds that linguistic categories and usage only *influence* thought. See Benjamin [Whorf,](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Lee_Whorf)  *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. by John B. Carroll (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956). An interesting facet examining some Romantic poetry with allegedly similar concerns is given in John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), especially Chapter 4, ‘The World or the Mind?’, pp. 41 – 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. A term from mathematics and physics which would be readily understood by mathematician Alex. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. The choice of the title *No Man* is itself a deliberate echo of : ‘No man is an island…’ appearing in John Donne (1572-1631) *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and Seuerall Steps in my Sicknes - Meditation XVII*, (1624):

     ‘No man is an island entire of itself; every man

     is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;

     … any man's death diminishes me,

     because I am involved in mankind.

     And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.’

     This works on several levels: as a reminder of the nature of the consensus reality the thin place subverts; as a reference to a ‘fourth’ entity in the story, and as a pun, which points towards several instances of word-play within the text. In varying degrees, word play occurs in a number of horror texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. See section 1.3.5 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. Discussed in section 2.2 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. ‘…the wind blowing in from across the sea lending the air a density which presaged storm.’ *No Man* p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. The chapter structure of *No Man* allows of division into four equal parts – intended to reflect four main characters – the three human, plus the ‘no man’ of the title – which could be read as being a ghost, or more pertinently, as the island itself. The characters have named chapters, intended to be read as having privileged authorial access, rather than being from that character’s point of view. The island itself heads Chapter 2 and Chapter 52. This structure is designed to reflect similar structures employed in *The Shining*. It was the subject of extensive discussion with Professor Jason Lee about the use of such techniques in writings by Russell Banks (b.1940), such as Russell Banks, *The Sweet* *Hereafter* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1992). Like King, Banks has achieved critical note for his descriptions of ‘small town America’ through privileged points of view.

     eraefater ( Heare [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. Described in *No Man*, Chapter 1 – although the full extent of Mike’s negligence only becomes explicit later. The exact nature of the entity is, and should be, ambiguous – it may be a manifestation of the island itself, taking a form suggested in Mike’s guilty memories, for example. As is the case with the three ‘thin places’ explored in the sections above on Jackson, King and Langan, the ambiguity does not extend to any question of *whether* *or not* the events are supernatural. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. Eleanor speculates about the previous lives of her ‘fellow islanders’, *No Man*, p. 82 and Alex refers to Eleanor and Mike as ‘fellow islanders’, *No Man* p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. In *No Man*, Eleanor’s suicide destroys her face (and thus a ‘distinguishing feature’ of her identity); Alex is eviscerated; the fisherman is lost at sea and Mike’s fate is undetermined by the end of the story. The island itself endures essentially unaltered, of course, and like Jackson’s Hill House ‘stands alone’, *No Man* Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. A reflection of a suggestion of Barthes (1915 – 1980), writing about the ‘death of the author’, that a text consists of multiple writings wherein this ‘…multiplicity is focused…’ in the minds of different readers. Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’ in Vincent Leitch ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and* *Criticism* (New York, NY: Norton, 2010), pp. 1322 – 5, p. 1324. As this might apply to *The Shining*, see Charles Bane, ‘ “You Weren’t Hired to Philosophise, Torrance”: The Death of the Author in *The Shining’*, in Jacob Held ed., *Stephen King and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), pp. 195 – 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. *No Man* chapter 52, pp. 335 – 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. *Danse Macabre*, pp. 457 – 8. In *No Man*, Mike thinks ‘There was no hope left…and that was a relief’. *No Man* p. 329 [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. Immanuel Kant has a section on ‘The Sublime’ in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), which Mary Midgley characterises thus: ‘…the Sublime was the…eighteenth-century name for things that impress us…by their vastness and total disregard of our needs….their absolute Otherness.’ Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man* (London: Routledge, rev. edn.1995) p. 347) [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. I wish to echo, of course, the words and sentiment of Dylan Thomas (1914 – 1953) in ‘Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night’:

     Do not go gentle into that good night.

     Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

     In Dylan Thomas, *In Country Sleep, and Other Poems*, (New York, NY: New Directions, 1952) [↑](#footnote-ref-515)