ESCAPING REALITY: FEMININE MADNESS AS METAPHOR IN PUBLISHED AND PERSONAL CREATIVE FICTION

by

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The first half of this thesis will use one novel written in 1959 and three written after 2020 to examine the effectiveness of the modern "mad woman" trope. It will strive to understand why authors continually reach for this literary trope when critiquing sociological frameworks of oppression in their works of fiction. It will explore what makes these four novels successful in their ability to use a metaphorical descent into madness as a way to represent emotional responses to real-world injustices. It will dissect how the madness experienced by the female characters in these works of fiction is gratifying to engage with, specifically for women and people of color, who may find validation in the representation of characters navigating a world where systems of discrimination continually demands them to submit to rigid sets of behavioral rules to fit into patriarchal standard. The second half of this thesis will include a portfolio of my own creative work, including two short stories I have written that engage with these concepts. These stories aim to depict feminine madness as a metaphorical representation of resisting real-world injustices in similar thought-provoking ways.

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Table of Contents

Introduction 5
Historical Context 6
The Yellow Wallpaper 8
Selected Novels 11
The House: The Settings of Madness 12
Haunted Houses 13
The Presence of the Haunted House Through Description 14
Haunted Houses as Personified Oppressive Structures 18
Suburban Homes 21
The Expectations of Marriage and Motherhood 22
Silenced Voices: The Descents into Madness 26
Social Isolation and Lack of Support 27
Manipulation and Abuse 29
Rage and Release: The Violence of Madness 31
Reclamation of Identity and Bodily Autonomy 32
Retribution and Justice 34
Complications in the Metaphor of Violence 36
Conclusion 38
Writer's Statement 39
Creative Portfolio 40
Signs of an Infestation 40
The Calder House 60
Bibliography 84

Introduction

Fictional literature serves as a metaphorical representation of how individuals experience reality within cultural, social, and political frameworks of human society. It is the mechanism through which people can explore emotional lived experiences and empower marginalized identities by constructing metaphorical scenarios that reveal and critique injustices in the world around them. In horror and speculative fiction, the creative construction of terrifying, fictitious situations enables both author and reader to engage with interpretations of real-world fears and tensions, particularly those that arise from the oppression and subjugation of people under systems of power. This thesis examines fiction that depicts women going mad under these tensions to represent the ways sexism and other intersecting forms of oppression affect real individuals. Literature that explores feminine madness functions in multiple ways. Firstly, it acts as a validating representation for audiences who share a similar identity or have a comparable lived experience to the female-identifying characters being depicted. This is especially true for people with intersecting marginalized identities who have historically not been given proper space in literature; women who are also people of color and/or queer have been underrepresented or misrepresented in fiction due to prejudice, stereotypes, and the scarcity of authors with those identities due to systemic barriers in the publishing industry. Thoughtful and validating representation allows people to feel as though they are not alone and that their experiences are worthy of attention. Additionally, literature about madness can also reveal shortcomings of contemporary society by presenting dramatized metaphors for real-world injustices as conflicts for characters to struggle against. For example, this literature can critique the failures of medical institutions to properly provide care for women, especially women of color, after childbirth and when struggling with postpartum depression. Or it might illuminate the ways women are

pressured into roles of motherhood under patriarchy. It can expose the flaws in systemic institutions and the absurdities of sociological ideologies held by collective cultures. Finally, literature about feminine madness is empowering and deeply gratifying to read as it offers a space for authors and readers to explore acts of resistance by including characters who push back against their constraints and fight against oppressive systems, often in bold, extreme ways that real individuals may never have the chance to do themselves.

Historical Context

The trope of the 'mad woman' has haunted countless works of fiction. Women characters, as a general rule, have been banished to the sidelines of a story, more fickle and insignificant than their male counterparts. Women in classic literature have cryptic visions of the future, rant and rave, and succumb to insanity or death because they have been scorned by a lover. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* Ophelia is driven to madness after being mistreated by Hamlet and learning her father has been murdered; she resorts to singing absurd songs about death before drowning in a river. In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot,* Nastasya Filippovna is driven to self-destruction after being scorned by the men in her life and is stabbed to death by the man she runs away with. While the madness in these stories perhaps does reveal trends of women struggling under the pressures and objectification in society, the madness of the women is not used as a metaphorical device to directly critique larger systemic issues and empower female-identified people. These stories are not centered around the women themselves, and therefore, do not act as impactful commentary about the experience of marginalization or societal expectation in the same ways modern or own-voice literature can. As more female authors come into the publishing industry, a new age of the "mad woman" trope has emerged in which the mad woman is both completely justified in her madness and also experiences the madness to reveal patterns of

sexism in contemporary society. An early example of this transgressive madness in classic literature could possibly be Bertha Mason, the woman in the attic, from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre,* who is mad because she has been locked up in an attic. Her madness reveals how she has been mistreated by her husband, and she resists against her constraints by committing violent acts such as destroying Jane Eyre's wedding veil and setting fire to a bed. Another example of this use of the "mad woman" trope is the widely popular short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman titled *The Yellow Wallpaper.* The story, first published in 1892, follows a young married woman believed to be ill by her inattentive husband and the rest of her family. In the attempt to heal her, her physician husband and brother bring her to a rural summer home to rest. In the upstairs room where she is confined, she begins to see strange things within the ugly yellow wallpaper, becoming obsessive and irrational, until she eventually succumbs to complete insanity. The story was written in response to the treatment of women's health at the time, the literature a direct representation of the mistreatment of women by health professionals and health institutions. In the 1800s, women were thought to be "fundamentally inferior to men," and their nervous systems were therefore weaker and more susceptible to illness. It was accepted by medical professionals that a woman's reproductive organs caused her to have increased irritability and because of the unpredictability of a uterus, a woman could fall ill to hysteria at any moment (Bassuk 7). In the Victorian age, the gender binary was strictly enforced, and women were expected to perform their role in that binary by becoming the perfect homemakers, wives, and mothers. Women who did not conform to those suffocating expectations or those who experienced depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues were diagnosed as 'hysterical' by medical professionals (Bassuk 9). Nineteenth-century physician Silas Weir Mitchell developed a treatment called the "rest cure," in which women were separated from society and forced into

rest, often including being fully bedridden. Their bodily autonomy was stripped away, and they were expected to give complete control to their male doctors (Bassuk 5). This is, of course, the treatment that Charlotte Perkins Gilman critiques in her short story. Gilman herself was subjected to an abusive rest cure, which made her mental condition worse, not better, and she wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* to give voice to her traumatic experience.

The Yellow Wallpaper

The Yellow Wallpaper is widely regarded as an essential piece of feminist literature for its unflinching critique of medical practices of the time and its creative use of metaphor to illuminate the unjust realities of women's lived experiences. In the story, the unnamed main character writes in a diary to document her days in the summer house, and as her reality slips around her, the diary entries get increasingly distressing and unhinged. The choice to narrate this story through specifically diary entries is effective as it not only captures the frightening unraveling of the main character's mind, but also sheds light upon how passive and silent women were forced to be about their own medical autonomy. The narrator's husband, who is a doctor, ignores the narrator's suspicions about the strange summer house and about the things she sees in the wallpaper. In the very first diary entry, the narrator says, "John is a physician, and perhaps — (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind —) perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster" (Gilman 1). Thanks to the diary, the reader gets access to the narrator's true feelings and opinions, which she has to keep hidden from her husband, brother, and other medical professionals. The narrator constantly grapples with what the men around her have told her and what she knows to be true in her version of reality. She says, "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. But what is one to do?" (Gilman 2). She tries to communicate her unease about the wallpaper and is told her suspicions are just nervous

imaginings (Gilman 3). Her agency is stripped, completely nonexistent, and the injustice is made obvious to the reader, who can plainly see how her surroundings are affecting her. She begins to see a female apparition within the walls and becomes unhealthily obsessed with it, even as John assures her "the place is doing [her] good" (Gilman 3). He advises her to use her self-control to "not let any silly fancies run away with [her]" immediately after refusing her request to leave the house (Gilman 6). This constant tension compels the reader to align themselves emotionally with the narrator, who they feel is justified in going insane because of the extent to which she has been locked away, her grievances disregarded. When the narrator begins to pull down the wallpaper in a crazed rage, the moment feels satisfying because she is finally resisting against the oppressive forces keeping her confined. Right before her destruction of the paper, she says about John: "I want to astonish him" (Gilman 9). She wants her husband to see how his actions have forced her to transcend reality as an escape and coping mechanism. Her madness is a metaphor for her resistance to the unjust medical practices, and the reader roots for this resistance up until the very end when John faints at the sight of her bereaved state, an ironically feminine stereotype that even further emphasizes the subversive themes of the story. In this modern use of the 'mad woman' trope, the woman is freed from stifling oppression through her insanity; she escapes her confines while the other characters are left in their grim reality, the one where systems of power like racism, sexism, and patriarchy still rule.

With *The Yellow Wallpaper* paving the way for a reimagined version of the 'mad woman,' female authors today, especially authors with intersecting identities such as women of color and queer women, are able to use this metaphor to explore their unique perspectives on modern societal issues. Modern 'mad women' literature may be used to critique an endless plethora of issues; it could reveal the ways women are ignored in the medical industry, the ways

women are scrutinized by social media, the ways women are disregarded in the judicial process when attempting to get justice for sexual violence, or even the more mundane ways women are always expected to preform gender and fit themsevles into rigid roles within society. The female characters chosen for examination in this thesis are forced into terrifying situations, which act as metaphorical stand-ins for these real-life abuses of oppressive systems and/or the unrealistic pressures placed upon female-identifying people to fit within patriarchal standards. The madness these characters experience allows them to transcend their abusive realities and fight back in subversive, unrestrained ways. Insane female characters embody everything patriarchal society insists is not acceptable; insane women are violent, confrontational, and selfish instead of caring, subservient, and meek. Insane women push back against the confines that restrain them, and the result of this is an emotionally gratifying reading experience, especially for, but not restricted to, readers who share a similar identity to the character in distress. The 'mad' character gets to behave in completely irrational and violent ways, something that can only be experienced by most through the medium of fiction. It is not only affirming to imagine a world where the 'mad woman' is completely justified in her descent, but it is also liberating to see her tear down and destroy whatever has been terrorizing her. The texts chosen for this thesis are gratifying representations of feminine madness because they devise settings that restrain and feature descents into madness that allow characters to escape and dismantle their injustices.

Selected Novels

In preparation for this thesis and in the search for examples of the modern 'mad woman' trope, I have read many novels, not all of which have been included in my final examination. When searching for novels to examine, I wanted to read from a broad range of authors with varying identities and perspectives. It was important to me to ensure that the final selection of novels included work from women of color, as the inclusion of intersecting identities allows for a more diverse exploration into critiques of systems of oppression. When doing my selection for the final four included novels, I chose the ones that I felt most personally affected by, as well as the ones that I deemed to be the most successful at deploying literary devices that emphasize the themes of the stories. For the literary analysis portion of this thesis, I have chosen to engage with *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson (1959), *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (2020), *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder (2021), and *House Woman* by Adorah Nworah (2022).

The House: The Settings of Madness

> "There is something strange about the house - I can feel it. I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a *draught,* and shut the window."
> - Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Setting does a considerable amount of the heavy lifting in these narratives to construct madness metaphors, as it imbues the stories with the correct tone fit for the thematic material and provides a confining space for the female protagonist to eventually resist against. Since these stories fall into the categories of speculative fiction and horror, an immersive, disturbing atmosphere can provide the essential context for the protagonist's madness. The setting also encourages readers to share the emotional experience of the female character, to feel fear when they feel fear and triumph when they feel triumph. This bond between reader and character pushes the reader to suspend their disbelief and align themselves with the character's behavior as well as emotions. So when the protagonist falls head-first into complete insanity, the reader will be rooting for them as they commit their illogical and violent behaviors. In each of the selected novels, the setting is a restricting space, existing as a symbolic representation of stifling gender expectations.

In nearly every novel read in preparation for this thesis, even those that have not been chosen for final examination, such as *Eileen* by Ottessa Moshfegh (2015) and *The Upstairs House* by Julia Fine (2021), the foreboding setting comes in the form of a house or manor. The 'haunted house' is a consistently repeated trope that goes hand-in-hand with the 'mad woman' trope, and it is effective in its ability to both create an unsettling tone and to represent real-world pressures. The symbolic relation to womanhood and the concept of the house is indisputable. The image of the suburban house is intrinsically tied to the expectation within the gender binary that women should stay home and look after the house and children, while men should be

breadwinners and make money for the family. Women were historically confined to a home and all the responsibilities that come with it; without the ability to create income of their own, they were forced to join the household of a husband and become the bearer of children. Even today, in what is colloquially called the fourth wave of feminism, there is still an underlying expectation that all women need to settle down into a house with a husband and children to lead a fulfilling life. The house, when used in stories about insane women, expands to become a symbolic idea, a prison of societal expectation.

Haunted Houses

The concept of a haunted house is successful because of the way it destabilizes usual assumptions about what a house should be. A home is supposed to be a place of safety and comfort, a place that protects against the potential dangers of the outside world and where families gather to spend time together. So when that idyllic image of a house is disrupted, when the house is evil, cold, and empty, it is terrifying. It becomes eerie and uncanny, which is the unsettling feeling that rises when something familiar is placed into surreal contexts or is missing an essential feature (Wilson 114). The haunted house instills uncertainty and anticipation; fear is created by the possibility of something frightening lurking beyond sight. In a haunted house story, unseen forces disrupt the calm—they bang on countertops, make curtains move, and most importantly, push characters to question their sense of reality (Wilson 117). Perhaps the most defining feature of the haunted houses from these selected novels is that they confine and suppress. The main female character is forced inside, into the house, where reality shifts and morphs, where she becomes suspicious and fearful of everything around her, and where she eventually descends into madness.

The Presence of the Haunted House Through Description

In both *The Haunting of Hill House* and *Mexican Gothic,* the entire story exists within the shadow cast by the haunted houses; the tone and atmosphere are entirely determined by the presence of the house, which exists as an active character. In *The Haunting of Hill House,* the main character, Eleanor Vance, gets invited to live at Hill House by Dr. John Montague to help research supernatural activity. The house is introduced in the first two unnerving lines of the novel: "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; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more" (Jackson 1). This introduction tells the reader explicitly that nothing alive can flourish there without some bending of reality, foreshadowing Eleanor's inevitable fall into insanity. Describing the house as "not sane" instills that necessary sense of the uncanny; it warns that there is something intrinsically disturbing about Hill House even though it is just a structure. *Mexican Gothic* provides a similar warning in the introduction of its haunted house, High Place. The main protagonist, Noemí, travels from Mexico City to High Place to check on her cousin, Catalina, who lives there with her new husband. She goes because Catalina has been sending concerning letters claiming that her husband is trying to murder her. When Noemí first arrives at High Place, she describes it as "looming over them like a great, quiet gargoyle" and like the "abandoned shell of a snail" (Moreno-Garcia 20-21). A gargoyle is a grotesque version of an animal attached to the side of a building, usually used to redirect rainwater. The comparison of the house to a gargoyle conjures the image of a deformed structure, looking down upon the protagonist. Gargoyles also have spiritual functions; they were thought of as protectors in multiple cultures who guard whatever building they are attached to and ward off evil spirits. This

history makes the comparison of High Place to a gargoyle especially interesting, as it evokes a sense of struggle between good and evil within the house, a struggle that is exemplified by Noemí's struggle to stay sane while facing the evils within the house. The comparison of this place to an "abandoned shell" communicates that this house is barren of the usual comforting elements of a house. It is rundown and desolate; it has "missing slats", "broken shingles", and Noemí seems astonished that anyone lives there at all (Moreno-Garcia 20). Both initial descriptions of these haunted houses establish them as uncanny and frightening, places where it would be easy to be trapped, and where reality is not reliable.

In *The Haunting of Hill House,* the wrongness of the house is constantly reinforced through immersive descriptions that disorient and confound. Jackson writes that "Hill House is a place of despair…a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope" (Jackson 35-36). Such a damning description foreshadows Eleanor's insanity by insinutaing that nothing can thrive there for long. One of Eleanor's house companions, Theodora, describes the nonsensical interior of the house by saying, "It's a crazy house at the carnival…Rooms opening out of each other and doors going everywhere at once and swinging shut when you come, and I bet that somewhere there are mirrors that make you look all sideways and an air hose to blow up your skirts, and something that comes out of a dark passage and laughs in your face" (Jackson 108). The specificity of the details, the carnival mirrors and the air blowing up a skirt, creates a visceral image. Her description allows the reader to visualize moving around in the space themselves, and it conjures unsettling feelings through the mention of unnatural occurrences like a door swinging shut on its own and a mirror reflecting a distorted image.

The High Place manor in *Mexican Gothic* is similarly constructed as a place for inevitable madness through specific description. The mansion is silent, neglected, and feels abandoned even though people actively live there. When Noemí explores the house, she thinks about how even beautiful daylight can not make High Place less dark. She marvels at the emptiness of the house, and as she explores, she is "greeted by the ghostly sight of furniture covered with white sheets and draperies shut tight" (Moreno-Garcia 38). The absence of light and other people establishes High Place as a place of isolation where it would be easy for one to fall victim to delusions or lapses in reality. In her description, Moreno-Garcia pays tribute to *The Yellow Wallpaper* by including a wallpaper of yellow medallion shapes that dance behind Noemí's eyelids and haunt her nightmares (Moreno-Garcia 47). In one instance, Noemí senses the presence of a woman in the room with her and then has the "impulse to rise and run her hands against the wall, as if to make sure there was nothing strange lurking behind the wallpaper" (Moreno-Garcia 57). Alluding to such specific imagery from *The Yellow Wallpaper* is effective because it immediately reminds the reader that nothing about the house is as it seems. Wallpaper is not just wallpaper, but a larger symbolic representation of the emotional turmoil in the mind of the female protagonist.

The manors in these two novels are also brought to life with sensory details, which emotionally align the reader to the character by allowing them to imagine exactly what the character is feeling. This emotional connection is essential because the novel's metaphors rely on the reader's willingness to believe the character's madness and root for them when they behave wildly. In both *The Haunting of Hill House* and *Mexican Gothic,* the family manors are freezing cold. Eleanor is constantly commenting about the chill inside Hill House. In one instance, she refuses to go through a small passageway because she is "overwhelmed with the cold air of mold

and earth which rushed at her" (Jackson 112). In another, she and her companions find a cold spot at the center of the house, and she says, "it was like passing through a wall of ice" (Jackson 130). When Eleanor is lying in bed one night, overwhelmed by a strange noise in the house, she thinks to herself, "It is so cold…I will never be able to sleep with all this noise coming from my head…I have had enough…I am so cold" (Jackson 222). Coldness evokes the feeling of being alone and being unprotected; the frozen quality of the house makes it a place where both hope and warmth cannot prevail. The sensation of cold is also associated with death and the body of a corpse, so the constant cold foreshadows the untimely end of the main character of the novel. In *Mexican Gothic,* the two main female characters, Noemí and Catalina, often complain about the frigidity of the house. When Catalina asks her cousin how she slept on her first night at the manor, Noemí admits she was "too busy freezing to death last night to mind the dampness," to which Catalina says High Place is "always damp and dark and very cold" (Moreno-Garcia 49). Noemí continues to insist throughout the book that the reason she can never sleep well is because it is always cold and it keeps her awake, even as she begins to experience horrific nightmares (Moreno-Garcia 70). Noemí has a nightmare about Howard Doyle, the patriarch of the house and Catalina's father-in-law, in which the much older man begins sexually assaulting her. She becomes frightened as he reaches out to undo the buttons on her nightgown: "It was chilly and he was undressing her. Behind her, she felt a presence, felt it like one feels a cold spot in a house" (Moreno-Garcia 80). The sensation of cold in this particular scene is so effective because the novel has already previously established that cold equals fear, and then makes this scene about sexual assault all about coldness. The sensory detail of frigidity reflects Noemí's fear in this moment that she will be forced to sexually engage with a man against her will and symbolically represents the pressure placed upon women to give up sexual favors and deeds to men regardless

of their lack of consent. In this way, the coldness in the novel pushes the narrative's themes to the forefront and also forces the reader to empathize with the protagonist.

Haunted Houses as Personified Oppressive Structures

The haunted houses in these stories are personified as active, living characters who oppose the protagonist and drag them down into despair. This personification raises the stakes of the story and creates a terrifying enemy to root against. In *The Haunting of Hill House,* the house has sinister desires and is always described like something alive. Hill House "seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice…The house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern…reared its great head back against the sky" (Jackson 30). If the house is "awake" and able to rear its head back, then the house is conscious of all its evildoing and is therefore responsible for Eleanor's descent into madness. The other characters in the novel personify Hill House in their dialogue; they think of the house as another character who interacts with them. Dr. Montague tells Eleanor and Theodora that "Hill House has a reputation for insistent hospitality; it seemingly dislikes letting its guests get away" (Jackson 61). The insinuation that a house can have a "reputation" as well as a malicious kind of hospitality forces the setting to become a character, who has the characters trapped and intends to do them harm if they attempt to escape. This personification is constant. The doctor says, "It watches…The house. It watches every move you make" (Jackson 78). Theodora says, "Hill House went dancing…taking us along on a mad midnight fling" (Jackson 192). Even the final line of the novel reads: "Hill House itself, not sane, stood against its hills, holding darkness within" (Jackson 233). Allowing the house to perform actions such as watching, dancing, and thinking brings the house to life on the page. It is an active oppressor, and it behaves the way a real-life

system of oppression would behave in terms of its constant demand for the people within the system to comply with its structured roles, punishing them at every turn if they dare to go against its wishes.

In *Mexican Gothic*, the house is personified in similar ways, but instead of being the main antagonist, the house exists as a horrific extension of the men of the house, the true villains of the story. In this way, the personification of High Place works to emphasize the connection between the conceptual house and a patriarchal desire for control. High Place and the male characters within it are the dominant oppressors who keep the women inhabitants, Noemí and her cousin, Cataline, submissive. The house is a character that bends to the will of the evil men who own it. The personification of the house begins in the very first description of it. As Noemí drives up, she thinks High Place seems to "leap out of the mist to greet them with eager arms" (Moreno-Garcia 20). Prescribing action and human body parts to the house personifies it and gives the house power. When Catalina is trying to explain to Noemí why she feels so disoriented and sick, she says, "The walls speak to me. They tell me secrets" (Moreno-Garcia 50). The walls, which are a part of the house, can talk and place ideas into the minds of those inside, an illogical detail that further solidifies the house as something alive. When Noemí learns that children once lived in the house, she is appalled: "Noemí tried to think of the house filled with the noise of children's laughter, children playing hide and seek…The house would have not allowed such a thing. The house would have demanded they spring from it fully grown" (Moreno-Garia 45). Her belief that the house would refuse certain inhabitants based on age reveals how powerful the house is in Noemí's perspective. All of these frightening personifications of the house make it feel like a living character, which can be manipulated by the men in the story to keep the

inhabitants trapped. Howard Doyle, the patriarch and father of Catalina's husband, bends the house to his will through the use of a fungus running throughout the house.

The manor in *Mexican Gothic* is infected with a magical fungus called "the Gloom" that links the patriarch, Howard Doyle, spiritually with the rest of the house and is a metaphor for the constant demand for female submission in a world dominated by male power. Using the Gloom, Howard can make the inhabitants of the house lethargic, plague them with nightmares, and make them more susceptible to his verbal commands. It is this fungus that puts strange visions and dreams into Noemí's mind and makes her hear voices that are not there. Francis, one of Howard's sons who befriends Noemí, tells her that the Gloom "runs under the house, all the way to the cemetery and back. It's in the walls. Like a giant spider's web. In that web we can preserve memories, thoughts, caught like the flies that wander into a real web. We call that repository of our thoughts, of our memories*"* (Moreno-Garcia 211). While the Gloom connects itself to all the members of the family, it is Howard Doyle who controls it. The Gloom allows him to live an immortal life by transferring his consciousness to the body of one of his children; all he has to do is keep having children, so he brings young women into the house under the guise of marrying them off to his sons and then forces them to bear his children. He has done this several times already before the events of the novel, and has even attempted to keep his supposedly 'superior' bloodline strong through incest. He uses women and sons to achieve immortal life and then discards them immediately after he is done with them. Noemí says that under Howard's gaze, she felt like "nothing but meat, she was the equivalent of a cut of beef inspected by the butcher, and wrapped up in wax paper. An exotic little something to stir the loins and make the mouth water" (Moreno-Garcia 236-7). Howard also uses the Gloom to kill off the Indigenous population who lived in the countryside before him by forcing them into mine labor, and by

purposefully infecting them with the deadly fungus. The house and the fungus do his evil bidding; they are extensions of his own will, and altogether they exist as a symbolic representation of the evils under toxic patriarchy. Moreno-Garcia writes that, to Howard, everyone in the novel is nothing but a body to him: "That's what they all were to them. The bodies of miners in the cemetery, the bodies of women who gave birth to their children, and the bodies of those children who were simply the fresh skin of the snake. And there on the bed lay the body that mattered. The father" (269). The fungus is a mechanism for the story to dramatize the ways the patriarchy reduces women, people of color, and children to merely bodies that fulfill predetermined roles, especially the roles of childbearing. This dramatization also illuminates the power a patriarch wields in a family dynamic. Even if the patriarch is old and dying, like Howard Doyle is, they transfer their worldviews, lifestyles, and oppressive ideologies onto their children, who will take up patriarchal roles themselves and continue the cycle of oppression. This perpetuation of harmful behavior is represented by the Gloom's power to grant Howard immortality as long as he uses and discards the bodies of women.

Suburban Homes

The settings in the other two selected novels, *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder and *House Woman* Adorah Nworah, are also constructed to confine the female main character and drive her mad, however, they specifically critique the Western, suburban expectation to stay at home, be subservient to a husband, and raise children. The settings are not haunted in the traditional sense; there are no ghosts or mystical body swapping; however, the houses are nearly just as frightening because of the suffocation the female protagonists feel within the house while attempting to contort themselves into the patriarchal standards of a perfect wife and mother. Even though the stories differ in essential contextual ways, both protagonists, the mother in *Nightbitch* and

Ikemefuna in *House Woman,* drift into insanity because of their inability and, often, blatant refusal to successfully perform their gendered roles. The house in both novels reminds them constantly of their expected behavior, acting as a prison from which the women attempt to escape in the only way possible: through the complete rejection of reality.

The Expectations of Marriage and Motherhood

The house in *Nightbitch,* as well as the entire suburban neighborhood where the novel takes place, exists as a reminder to the main character that she has lost a part of herself in the stifling and isolating experience of having to raise a child practically on her own. The mother in the story, who is not given a name besides simply "mother", has a three-year-old son who requires her constant attention and a husband who leaves them both alone in the house for weeks on end for his job. The house is an unassuming suburban house, "a mid-century bungalow with odd angles," which the mother had once thought was the "height of charm" (Yoder 44). The house in this story is not physically dominating or scary, but rather, it is suffocating because of the mother's constant responsibilities and lack of support. When her son was born, she tried to be a working mother but ended up having to give up her dream career to have enough time to take care of their son. Her entire world has been reduced to the house and its monotony. She becomes annoyed at the house, "angered by the doors, all too narrow or too short" and frustrated that "no matter how much she cleaned, the place never felt clean." She thinks to herself, "This house…growing angry, angrier. This fucking house" (Yoder 44). She feels a deep sense of confinement because she completes the same tasks every day and has no support system to help her with child care. She reflects that, "every morning, [is] the same. Every day, the same. After breakfast, play with trains, read a book about trains, read the same book again, again, this is the last time, and one more time, okay, just one more" (Yoder 43). The list format conveys a sense

of frustration at the monotony in her daily activities. The reader feels her yearning for the stimulation of art and education she once had access to. She begs for a break from the impossible expectations for motherhood, longing for "even the smallest bit of mental stimulation, for a return to her piles of books, to her long-abandoned closet of half-formed projects, to one entire afternoon of solitude and silence" (Yoder 28). When she begins her descent into madness and is visited by a giant horde of sentient dogs, a retriever takes her hand, "leading her away from her home and the boy and the life she both wanted and didn't" (Yoder 62). The dogs specifically lead the mother away from the home and neighborhood, a delusion that is meant to represent the mother's desire to escape her circumstances. The house in this novel is a conceptual stand-in for the pressures of motherhood. It is a source of confinement, a space that demands she behave as a perfect mother. Eventually, the mother in the story escapes this pressure by becoming a dog and running away from the house.

While *Nightbitch* critiques motherhood expectations using the suburban house, it is focused only on the experience of a middle-class white woman who has married a man she loves and has chosen to have a child. On the other hand, *House Woman* by Adorah Nworah uses the suburban setting to tell the story of a woman of color forced into a marriage she did not choose to critique the injustice of involuntary arranged marriage. In this story, a young woman named Ikemefuna Azubuike is brought to the United States from Lagos, Nigeria, to be married off to a young man named Nnaemeka. She is held in Texas against her will by Nnaemeka's parents in their suburban home, nicknamed The Sugar Land House, and forced into the role of obedient wife and mother. The Sugar Land House is Ikemefuna's prison, and the physical characteristics of the house reflect the hostile nature of the arranged marriage. Nnaemeka first meets Ikemefuna in the kitchen of the Sugar Land house, where she is already preparing him food, and he refers to

her at first only as “the woman in the kitchen” (Nworah 15). Introducing her in this way confines her completely in the kitchen, the place where many traditionally feminine labors take place, such as cooking and cleaning. The expectation that Ikemefuna cook for Nnaemeka before they have even met frames the house and kitchen as a place of pressure for her; she is reduced in this suburban environment to only a wife who cooks for her husband. While the house itself, a “brick-red house with wrought iron banisters that stretched to the second floor,” is not foreboding from its description, it is still a suffocating setting for Ikemefuna because of the other characters within it (Nworah 26). Her madness manifests because the characters around her mistreat her and trap her inside the Sugar Land House.

Rather than relying on physical descriptions or personification of the house, this novel frames the Sugar Land House as a terrifying setting through the characterization of the villainous people inside of it who manipulate her and abuse her. The Sugar Land House belongs to Ikemefuna’s mother-in-law and father-in-law, who act as her direct oppressors throughout the novel, keeping her confined within the house, treating her as an object, and encouraging their son, Nneameka, to do the same. The mother-in-law, Agbala, and the father-in-law, Eke, trick Ikemefuna by telling her she is only coming to Texas as a guest for a two-week stay, and then trapping her like an animal inside the house for months on end (Nworah 131). They install bars on the window of her bedroom to keep her from escaping (Nworsh 56). They insist she behave like a traditional Igbo wife and always cook for her husband, clean the house, and never complain. They also expect her to conceive a child with their son, Nnaemeka, as soon as possible, and when she becomes pregnant, she is expected to be content with her life.

The author of this novel, Adorah Nworah, does excellent work at making in-laws frightful by giving them objectifying dialogue. Agbala and Eke constantly tell Ikemefuna she

must be obedient to their son, telling her she "must sleep with him every night" and "show him [she is] a real woman" (Nworah 25). They force Ikemefuna to give up her sexual freedom along with everything else. When Ikemefuna does not get pregnant right away and tries to explain this to her mother-in-law, Agbala tells her to "shut her devil mouth" and that she is "not trying hard enough" to get pregnant (Nworah 79). In another instance, Agbala says she believed something evil is inside of Ikemefuna, that "an evil spirit was eating up [Ikemefuna's] sons just as they formed in [her] thankless womb" (Nworah 110). Their language is harsh and jarring, and it develops these characters as antagonists acting within the confines of the house. Their actions are just as spine-chilling as their dialogue. Abgala finds birth control pills among Ikemefuna's belongings, and she destroys all of them, stripping Ikemefuna of her final opportunity for bodily autonomy. She later taunts Ikemefuna with the loss of these pills (Nworah 111). In one surreal moment, the novel reveals that Eke has eaten Ikemefuna's passport. Ikemefuna recalls "Eke yanking her passport from her grasp as the house's yolk walls and barred windows caved in on her. Eke's yellowed teeth clamping down on her passport's pages" (Nworah 130). The destruction of her last form of identification, her only chance at ever leaving the United States by herself, is a powerful metaphorical action. The patriarch physically consumes the identity of the daughter-in-law, who did not wish to ever join the family. It is such a vivid dramatization of the loss of identity that is experienced by those in unwanted arranged marriages. The allusion to "yolk walls" and the color yellow in Eke's teeth also interestingly brings the reader, yet again, back to *The Yellow Wallpaper.* The violent and dominating actions and dialogue of the monstrous people within the house turn the Sugar Land House into a harmful place, one that stifles Ikemefuna's identity and desires, and eventually drives her to insanity.

Silenced Voices: The Descents into Madness

"John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try."

— Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

In all these novels, the protagonists' descent into madness begins when they see things, hear things, and feel things that no one else can, and when they are blatantly ignored or dismissed when they attempt to tell someone else about the things haunting them. This repeated plot progression imitates situations in the real world in which marginalized voices are commonly silenced when they attempt to shed light upon serious concerns about the way they are treated in systems of society or interpersonal interactions. For example, women, especially women of color, have a much greater difficulty getting their needs met in medical institutions when expressing pain or other health concerns. Traditional medicine was focused solely on examinations of the male body, and therefore, a lot of ignorance still exists today surrounding women's specific health care (Tuana 2). It was only in the 1970s, when the Women's Health Movement began, that medical professionals began to reexamine how women have been overlooked in medical spaces. Practices rooted in misogyny and prejudice slowly began to be eradicated, but even in modern day, women often have their claims ignored by medical professionals. For example, birth control symptoms are consistently reported as worrisome and concerning, and yet, medical establishments continue to systemically hide the potential dangers of contraceptives to continue making a profit (Tuana 9). Mental health in women is equally difficult to navigate. Serious postpartum depression was disregarded throughout the 1900's as simply the "baby blues", and when women attempted to comminute their experiences of

loneliness and depression, they were told by psychiatrists they simply needed to mature quicker and not allow themselves to be "let down" by the realities of motherhood (Morgan 26). In response to women expressing anxiety and depression in postpartum, medical professors illogically cut down the amount of time they were allowed to recuperate in the hospital directly after birth, worsening the isolation and despair they already felt (Morgan 25). The systems of society set up to help people are often the ones blatantly ignoring the needs of marginalized people, which is why critiques of these systems from the perspective of marginalized identities are so important to consume. The ignorance of and dismissal of marginalized identities in structures like hospitals and the government is "systematically cultivated" and is just one of the ways those structures keep people suppressed under a patriarchal society (Tuana 9). Literature critiquing that ignorance presents the navigation of their constraints as deeply frustrating and troubling, mirroring the emotional experience of those who must attempt to articulate concerns about real-life obstacles.

Social Isolation and Lack of Support

In *The Haunting of Hill House,* the protagonist, Eleanor, begins to truly descend into madness when the people she thought were her friends suddenly detach themselves from her and isolate her from the social group. The other characters, once friendly and welcoming, become cruel and dismissive of her as the novel progresses. When Eleanor opens up about the nature of her mother's death and explains her worry that her trauma is causing the spirits of the house to torment them, Luke, the heir of the house, and Theodora, her closest friend, waste no time in making her feel trivial and short-sighted. Theodora tells Eleanor that she probably just likes to think it is her fault the house torments them because she is self-centered (Jackson 234). In multiple instances, Eleanor believes her friends talk about her behind her back; she says she can

hear them, their voices "edged sometimes with malice, sometimes rising in mockery" (Jackson 235). All of the people inside the house toy with her emotions, saying mean things with a smile on their faces, making her feel isolated from the in-group. In one specific scene, Eleanor opens up to all of them about how she is afraid of loneliness and has been experiencing despair in the house. To this, the doctor tells her to "stop trying to be the center of attention," and the others agree that she is vain and always tries to be in the limelight (Jackson 177). As the novel progresses, Eleanor grows more and more resentful and paranoid of her companions. After Theodora accuses Eleanor of writing her own name on the walls of the house, an accusation Eleanor vehemently rejects, Eleanor seems to have a revelation. She suddenly finds Theodora "wicked" and thinks about how she wishes to "batter her with rocks" and "watch her dying" (Jackson 173-4). This violent thinking allows the reader a glimpse into Eleanor's worsening mental state. Her detachment from the rest of her housemates pushes her to think more irrationally and is the catalyst for her descent into madness.

In *Nightbitch,* the mother's isolation in motherhood and her lack of a support system are what drives her descent into madness, or in other words, her transformation into a dog. The husband, who should ideally be helping with childcare and listening to her concerns, is dismissive of her when she tries to tell him about the strange changes happening to her. When she shows him her teeth, which grow sharper every day, he says, "Your tooth looks the same to me. You always think something's wrong with you" (Yoder 5). When she is worried she is growing a tail, he laughs at her: "He was always laughing at things she said" (Yoder 31). His dismissal of her fears makes the husband a frustrating character; he refuses to see what is right in front of him. He is a metaphorical stand-in for the ways male partners or systems operating under patriarchy refuse to acknowledge that mothers often struggle mentally with the never-ending

responsibilities of childcare. The mother asks: “Couldn’t [the husband] see how she struggled? Was he capable of acknowledging all she did? He made it seem as though she were on an extended holiday” (Yoder 57). Especially in Western culture, motherhood is largely a solitary role, which puts unrealistic pressure on mothers to always be perfect, to be everything for their children. These expectations, coupled with the dismissal of her mental suffering by her husband, isolate the mother in *Nightbitch.* The mother says she can “almost touch her loneliness, as if it were her second child”, a heartbreaking sentiment that conveys her mental distress. The mother begins to turn into a dog as a way for her to cope with her isolation from society and the lack of support she receives within her relationship.

Manipulation and Abuse

In *Mexican Gothic,* the protagonist, Noemí, is purposefully lied to and manipulated by the other characters so they can keep her in the dark about their sinister goals: their plan to keep both her and her cousin there so they can bear more children for Howard Doyle’s spirit to inhabit. Since Noemí is at High Place to investigate the concerning letters sent to her by Catalina, the men seek to crush her inquisitiveness. Every piece of dialogue they speak and every action they take is meant to belittle her and silence her voice. Virgil, who is her cousin’s husband, insists to Noemí that she is “on a quest to find faults around you”, making her feel as though her suspicions are rooted in delusion (Moreno-Garcia 195). The men are reluctant to let Noemí get a second medical opinion on her cousin’s mental condition because they insist they have a perfectly good doctor of their own (Moreno-Garcia 63). At the dinner table, Noemí is prohibited from speaking as it might disturb the patriarch in his upstairs bedroom (Moreno-Garcia 31). At every turn, the men in the household discredit her opinions as a way to keep her controlled and under their power. She begins to go mad because of his constant manipulation, questioning her

sense of what is real and not. The only reason she is able to eventually uncover the truth about High Place at all is because she is helped by ghosts of women who have been murdered by Virgil and Howard, who tell her to "open her eyes" to the manipulation (Moreno-Garcia 220).

A similar descent into madness takes place in *House Woman* because Ikemefuna's madness is directly caused by the abusive behavior of her husband and in-laws. Her complaints are not just ignored, but brutally shot down, and she is punished for voicing them. She is manipulated into thinking that everything she is experiencing is normal, even though she is being blatantly mistreated, and her madness ensues because of this incongruity. Ikemefuna, thinking her husband, Nnemaeka, will be more virtuous than his parents, tells him of Abgala and Eke's actions, but he is quick to turn his back on her. When she tells him his parents have not let her leave the house in months, he tells her they are just "overprotective" and he refuses to accept that there is anything wrong (Nworah 131). He tells her to look around at the Sugar Land House and to "get used to it" because it is now her home (Nworah 132). His betrayal is hurtful, and his words are meant to scare her into submission. Her physical pain and fatigue are ignored as well. When she is carrying Nnemaeka's child and asks to go to the doctor because she is worried about her health, Agbala insists she is fine and that it is "normal to feel tired when you're pregnant" (Nworah 238). The insistence that the pain she feels is normal is so representative of women who communicate their physical pain, only to be turned away by doctors and other medical professionals. Ikemefuna's constant manipulation by those around her makes her descent into madness inevitable. The only way she can escape this hellish reality is through insanity.

Rage and Release: The Violence of Madness

> "Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbus eyes and waddling fungus growths just shreik with derision! I am getting angry enough to do something desperate."
> — Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Each of these novels crafts a plot in which tension rises until the critical point where the pressure placed upon the female protagonist is finally too much for her to bear, and she is forced to liberate herself from that pressure through acts of insanity, especially acts that include violence. Violence has a very compelling function in these metaphors for madness. The transcendence from reality—the lapses in judgement and rational thinking—is important because it allows these women the opportunity to escape their stifling situations through the transgressive act of not succumbing to patriarchal realities and ways of thinking. Violence alongside this rejection of reality allows them to physically fight back against their oppressors and destroy the confines that forced them to go mad in the first place. Violence feels like a satisfying behavior for these women because they have spent the entire novel being silenced, suppressed, and prodded at by those around them, so their outbursts of physical rage feel justified. When the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* tears down the yellow wallpaper and cruelly taunts her husband from beyond the door while she does it, the reader roots for her violent liberation.

So why is violence so intrinsically related to this metaphor for madness as liberation? In Lisa Downing's journal article "(S)Extremism': Imagining Violent Women in the Twenty-First Century", she argues that feminism "fulfils a symbolically violent function" because it directly combats the objectives of the patriarchal status quo (213). Women who do not conform to roles required by the patriarchy to uphold male power are seen as violent to that system, and are punished through social exclusion and ridicule. Not only is a woman's rejection of conformity a

symbolically violent act, but also, in terms of literal violence, women are paradoxically seen as both more likely to be the victim and perpetrator of it. Downing examines an interesting order given to members of West Germany's anti-terrorist squad in the 1980s to target and shoot female terrorists first because they "will not hesitate to shoot and are more impulsive than male terrorists". This order later became the standard rule of thumb for other military anti-terrorist groups (215). This example exemplifies the belief that a woman's motivations and actions are inspired solely based on "biological determinism gone awry" or pure instinct, insinuating that women do not use logic or reason to behave in the ways they do (Downing 216). This culturally accepted sexist assumption that women are more prone to extremism and instinctual violence does not stop the same systems from justifying violence against women as normal, because women are seen as the subjects of men and lesser than them in nearly every way. These two beliefs go hand-in-hand especially well when thinking about symbolically violent women who resist patriarchal roles; violence done to extremist women who fight back against sexist ideologies can be justified under the belief that they are posing a threat to the balance of society and must be controlled (Downing 222). These novels, which allow the female characters to be completely violent and destructive of the rigid boundaries around them, act as a gratifying opportunities for a reader (and author) to experience unashamed resistance against sexist frameworks without the ridicule and punishment that might affect them if they were to do these things in real life.

Reclamation of Identity and Bodily Autonomy

The main character in Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* goes mad in the sense that she believes her soul and body to be morphing into a dog, and not just any dog, but a savage one who is not restricted by human society's expectations of behavior. The mother in *Nightbitch* gains the

physical and behavioral characteristics of a dog, including sharp teeth, an intense appetite for raw meat, and the urge to hunt and kill small animals. Her transformation begins as a way for her to release herself from expectations and constraints, as her dog persona is free from the pressures of being a perfect mother and is allowed to hold strong opinions and behave irrationally. The mother "*likes* being a dog, because she can bark and snarl and not have to justify it. She can run free if she wants. She can be a body and instinct and urge. She can be hunger and rage, thirst and fear, nothing more" (Yoder 83). A dog, often thought of as a subservient and loyal creature who follows orders at all times, can also be a symbol of wildness and rabidness. It is the perfect animal for the mother in *Nightbitch* to transform into because while she does behave as a dutiful wife and patient mother, she is slowly pushed to her breaking point. In other words, a dog will bite if kicked one too many times. Her potential for wildness has always been inside her, and because of her transformation, that expression of freedom can come racing to the surface. When she becomes a dog, she loses her sense of time and reality, and allows herself to finally simply do what she wants, not what her husband or child wants, but what *she* wants.

For the mother in *Nightbitch,* the transformation into a dog is a loss of control, but it is a reclaiming of bodily autonomy and creative identity. As a dog, she has access to passion and identity in a way she does not when she is a human mother. The human version of her has given up the dream job of owning an art gallery and creating new artwork. Before her child, she used to be creative and ambitious, and now there is "not a single creative impulse inside her, no matter how hard she searched" (Yoder 23). Her identity as a creative and a business owner has been stripped away, replaced by the brutal monotony of a life where she is not allowed to exhibit emotional displays of frustration. However, as a dog, her passion is returned, and she is allowed to follow her desires as soon as they come to her: "She had followed her body. What else was

there to follow?" (Yoder 83). In her dog body, she is rageful and murderous, the violence a metaphorical outburst of all her repressed emotions and frustration. As a dog, she is "overwhelmed by her strength" and "awash in her own violence", exclaiming that she could rip out the throats of all the animals in the park. She expresses that this violence is "what she needed. [She needed] one night to not care what anyone thought, to shit where she pleased, to not be needed by any living thing, and to be only a body in motion in the dark, a shadow, a ghost of herself, who listened only to the mandates of her body" (Yoder 91-92). Her rage manifests in the killing of small animals, including her own pet cat, as well as nightly ventures outside to run around and feel the strength of her body (Yoder 90, 153). There is gratification in seeing this kind of unrestricted behavior on the page coming from a character who has been grappling with her sense of self and her loss of agency throughout the entire novel.

Retribution and Justice

In *House Woman,* the protagonist, Ikemefuna, is at the whim of her own violence, often entering into a trance-like state where she lashes out and attempts to break herself free of her captors. These moments when she fails to control her own body are moments when her true self is revealed and breaks through the manipulation to act in resistance to her environment. Ikemefuna's trances cause her to lose time and her sense of reality; she often wonders how long she has been standing somewhere, staring off into space (Nworah 23). She emerges from these trances in the midst of violence, for example, in one scene, she comes back to her body to find her hands wrapped around her mother-in-law's neck, in the middle of strangling her (Nworah 28). These critical moments of madness, coupled with violence, tend to happen directly after Ikemefuna is mistreated. When Agbala tells her about the destroyed birth control pills, Ikemefuna "wrestled for control of her body…She caught snatches of her fingers tugging at the

thicket of hair beneath Agbala's head scarf. Of her arms tightening around Agbala's legs" (Nworah 111). In the climax of the story, when Ikemefuna is convinced she is about to be murdered by her husband, she pulls out a knife on him, losing control of reality as she wields the knife, aiming to kill. Nworah writes, "Ikemefuna's world dissolved into swirls of luminous grey as she swiped the knife in every direction…Nothing and nowhere was safe. Not the Sugar Land house…Not neighbors who stood on doorsteps with brownies or peeper through bedroom blinds. Not her mother's quick-fire Igbo or the suffocating embrace of a lover" (282-283). The animalistic violence she loses herself in is a direct consequence of the constant abuse she endures. She has been pushed too far, and these moments of pure, uncontrolled rage allow her the opportunity to be released from victimhood and submission to finally be free.

In *Mexican Gothic,* the scenes in which the female characters inflict violence upon the men and the house are so satisfying because there is a sense of justice being served; the men get what they deserve after attempting to coerce, abuse, and murder the women inhabitants of High Place. The cousin of the protagonist, Catalina, who has been kept at High Place for much longer than Noemí, is given a climactic opportunity for violence towards the end of the novel. She is the one who ends the tyrannical Doyle line by killing Howard Doyle. She uses a scalpel to stab him in the neck, becoming "a maenad" and bringing forth "a river of black pus and dark blood" (Moreno-Garcia 271). A "maenad" is a title from Greek mythology, given to the female followers of the god of wine, Dionysus, who performed crazed dances and possessed unnatural strength to tear apart enemies. The comparison of Catalina to a maenad communicates her crazed state of mind and also emphasizes her strength in this moment to inflict harm upon someone who is physically much stronger than her. The killing of Howard is the catalyst for the women's triumph in the conflict. When Virgil, Howard's son, attempts to regain control in his father's

place, Noemí and Catalina team up to destroy the Gloom once and for all and violently kill him as well. Together, the two women set fire to the house, and they watch from the outside while the oppressive structure burns "until it was all reduced to ashes", imagining Howard Doyle inside being eaten up by the flames (Moreno-Garcia 293). Their violence against the men and the destruction of the house in the ending of the novel is satisfying because they break free from their submissive states and physically take power away from the two villainous forces in the novel. In the metaphors established by the novel, their violence liberates them from the abusive structures around them.

Complications in the Metaphor of Violence

Arguably, the least satisfying of all the endings in these selected novels is the ending of *The Haunting of Hill House* because although Eleanor's violence technically frees her from her constraints and isolation, it is violence inflicted upon herself, making her end a tragic one rather than a gratifying one. Eleanor's colleagues grow worried about her mental state and banish her from the house, claiming they are trying to protect her from potentially harming herself or any of them (Jackson 264). Eleanor resists their banishment, insisting that she has nowhere else to go and that it is unfair of them to keep Hill House all to themselves, but eventually, she gets into the car to drive away. Though she does not drive away, instead, she drives herself directly into a huge tree at the end of the driveway of Hill House (Jackson 271). This act of violence does not represent any kind of liberation, but rather, emphasizes Eleanor's surrender to the constraints that caused her madness. In her final moments, she thinks, "*Why* am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me?" (Jackson 271). She has come completely undone by the house and by the social rejection of the other character, and sadly, she is not able to come back from these abuses. It may be considered that death is, in itself, a sort of escape from her constraints,

however, I argue that this novel is doing something slightly different. Instead of depicting an enjoyable act of resistance against Eleanor's abuse, Jackson has chosen to depict the tragic ending, one symbolic of someone unable to fight back against their oppressive situation. Eleanor does escape the house and isolation through her madness, but is not allowed the chance to destroy anything that has caused her this strife, nor reclaim her identity through rage. Her ending is tragic, and Hill House remains standing, unbroken by Eleanor's presence. This becomes a metaphor for deeply-rooted societal structures that injure marginalized identities without suffering any abuse of their own. In this way, *The Haunting of Hill House* is a complication to the usual satisfying emotional experience of the "mad woman" trope.

Conclusion

Contemporary interpretations of the "mad woman" trope serve to illuminate and critically examine the systemic and interpersonal injustices of human society. Storytelling as a medium allows the imagination to construct vivid representations of the ways systems of power confine marginalized identities with plotlines and characters that emotionally affect readers. The madness experienced by the female characters within these stories acts as a metaphor for the coping with and the resistance against real-world oppressive or abusive structures. These stories critique patriarchal systems that enforce strict rules about how women are allowed to behave and express themselves. Madness acts as a form of resistance to these rules; the female characters are allowed to behave in transgressive ways and escape the confines of their situation. Some are even given the chance to destroy the systems that previously controlled them through acts of violence. These stories are liberating because they both validate the experience of navigating a world that was not designed for them to succeed, and they simulate the emotional experience of fighting against that world. These four novels effectively utilize setting, characterization, dialogue, and other literary devices to construct this emotional experience for the reader. Ironically, these stories about madness allow for broader reflections about reality. They allow us to imagine how society can be changed to be more accessible and less destructive towards marginalized identities. In the same way *The Yellow Wallpaper* shed light upon the counterintuitive medical practices of the 1890s, modern-day literature also has the power to change public opinions and inspire real societal change.

Writer's Statement

A few years ago, I found that I was consistently being drawn towards novels about violent, "crazy" women who seemed to be going insane as a way for them to escape horrific situations. I found myself wondering: Why is it so fun to read about women who lose their minds and behave in absolutely unhinged ways? Why does their madness seem to be a sort of revelation or liberation instead of a troubling thing? Why do I root for their descents into madness, and why do I find myself coming back to these stories time and time again? Being a writer myself, I was fascinated by the ways the authors of these stories were able to write narratives that simultaneously scare and delight. I have chosen to include two short stories in this thesis, where I explore this trope on my own through my own creative voice. I have placed constraints and pressures on both of the protagonists in my works to critique larger real-world issues. The madness in each of these works is a direct result of these pressures. In the first short story, *Signs of an Infestation,* my protagonist becomes obsessive and violent so that she can release herself from a stifling environment where she does not feel fulfilled by her relationship and life. The second short story, *The Calder House,* explores the effects of generational trauma and how harmful patriarchal beliefs can be released through careful acts of resistance. I have tried to keep my examination of these four novels in mind while writing, as examples of effective literary tools and as guiding maps, however, it was important to me to also express myself using my unique voice. I allowed my ideas to expand as I wrote, attempting not to fully emulate one author or another, but to explore this trope on my own and gain experience as a writer through the drafting, revising, and editing process.

Creative Portfolio

Signs of an Infestation

They were hiding from me on purpose.

The bugs, they knew things. They knew their way through the labyrinth of wood underneath the carpet floors of our apartment. They knew how to weave their way around the wiring in the walls to play with the circuitry and make the lights flicker, how to position themselves just so to block the plumbing so the water came out in spurts and tasted like the rancid walls of a sewer. They knew when to come out of hiding and when to stay hidden. They knew to show themselves only to me, and not to Simon because Simon, of course, refused to believe anything was wrong. They knew my movements, my exact route from the bedroom to the kitchen to turn on the coffee pot every morning. They knew my spot on the couch, my side of the bed, and that peach was my favorite flavor of yogurt. They knew when I left for work in my old, red Toyota Hatchback and what time I came home. I always felt them watching me, surveying me, the whole horde of them shuffling about on top of each other. Thousands of tiny eyes, looking, waiting, turned toward me in the bathroom when I blew my nose and in the kitchen when I simmered tomatoes on the stove until they popped and in the living room where I exhaled cigarette smoke out of our ridiculous triangular window. They knew my very scent.

I did not know if the apartment had come with the bugs, if the two of us had moved into a doomed place already infected with them, or if we had brought them with us when we moved in, if we had unknowingly brought them tucked in our cardboard moving boxes in between our ceramic mugs and picture frames. At first, I blamed only the apartment, the five-story concrete building we'd moved into, but the more I ruminated, the more I reflected, the more I believed the bugs had been with us all along. Somewhere in our flesh. In our foundation.

The apartment—our apartment—was made up completely of triangles. It was a claustrophobic little place. Whoever had designed the floor plan had made it a perfect right triangle. The hallway door fed you directly into the living room, where a couch was pushed against what we came to lovingly call 'the hypotenuse wall'. There were no walls separating the living room and kitchen; everything sort of blended together. The kitchen, which had cream countertops and cabinets, was cramped because it was tucked away inside the smallest angle of the triangle. If the whole apartment were the head of an arrow, the kitchen was the very tip, the part that would embed itself into a bullseye. Our bedroom, mine and Simon's, was nestled in the one completely ordinary corner of the room, the one that made the right triangle right. When you closed the bedroom door, you could almost pretend the layout made any sense.

The apartment had come furnished, though every piece of furniture they provided was triangle-shaped as well. The beige couch and matching ottoman both had a subtle triangle shape, which made it slightly uncomfortable for two people to sit and put their feet up at once. The dining table had three sleek sides and exactly three chairs. The shower in the bathroom was set in the corner of the room, another triangle. The one window we had was a tiny porthole-sized triangle that looked out onto the parking lot. Even the mirrors in the bathroom had been shaped into triangles, the reflective glass pointing up towards the ceiling.

When Simon and I first toured the apartment, the triangles were comical. They made us laugh. The landlord, a short man with balding hair, walked us in, and Simon turned to me immediately. I could always tell when something amusing had caught his attention because his eyebrows shot way up and his lips pursed into a perfect, taut line. His eyes met mine. I knew he was thinking the exact same thing as me. What the *fuck* was this place? It was like someone had started to build an apartment and then gave up halfway through, decided to chop it diagonally

into a piece of something, not caring that it made you feel as though you were walking into a dead end. I brought my hand up to my mouth to stop myself from bursting into laughter. Simon did the same. After hours of apartment searching, we were perhaps both a bit delirious. The landlord didn't seem to notice our rudeness. He gave his spiel and then let us explore the tiny place for ourselves.

"What *is* this place?" Simon asked when we were alone. "No, no, seriously, stop laughing. I feel like I've stepped into one of those cake icing bags. What are those called?"

"A piping bag?"

"Yeah. A piping bag. We're the icing. This place is gonna spit us out onto a cake. Oh god. Why the hell are there only two walls?"

"Stop being so dramatic," I said. "There's three walls."

"It's like a weird, clown fun house," Simon said, going into the kitchen and stretching his arms out to touch either side of the room at the same time.

"Yeah, the last place might be better than this one," I said.

"Are you kidding? The broccoli smell apartment? It was so bad in there my eyes were watering."

I laughed. "And there was no washing machine there."

Simon gave a serious nod. "True. I am not lugging our stuff to a laundromat anymore."

At this, I felt annoyed. I said, "It's not like you ever do the laundry."

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

I went to the wall to inspect the little closet that had a washing machine and dryer. It would be nice to finally have in-unit laundry.

“Maybe we can look at places out of the city,” I said. What I did not suggest was that we look for places outside of Washington entirely. I knew Simon would never go for that.

“Twenty-minute radius,” Simon said over his shoulder, as he tested out the triangle couch. His reminder. He wanted us to get a place within twenty minutes' walking distance of his new office building. Truth be told, I hated all the apartments in this area, every last one of them.

“Right,” I said. I patted the washing machine. “Well, this place definitely isn’t the worst we’ve seen today.”

Simon looked around, surveying. He shrugged. “Not the worst,” he finally agreed.

In the end, we both agreed that the price of our triangle apartment was hard to beat. When it really came down to it, when we were sitting down looking at all our options side by side, the choice became obvious. The triangle apartment had utilities and WiFi included in the rent. It was only ten minutes from downtown. It had a gym. We snatched the place off the market only a week later.

The layout of the apartment made the place hard to decorate. We kept all the furniture provided to us, and we tried to move everything around to make it somewhat our own, but in the end, everything ended up exactly where it was when we first walked in. There was only one arrangement that made sense at all. Moving the couch made us stub our toes on the edge of the wood. Pushing the table deeper in the living room forced us to swerve around it on our way out the door. We discovered there was no changing the place. Apartment 501 was a fixed point, unaffected by us or our few possessions we brought.

I saw the very first bug in the shower. It had been a long day at work. I was a sales associate at the PetMall downtown. While I was grossly overqualified for the job, I never actually finished my animal behavior degree, so I had been rejected by every other job I’d

applied for related to animal research. Somehow, I've been selling fish tanks at PetMall for more than four years now. Every time I remembered that fact, it did not feel real. It was like the detail in a story I was hearing about someone else. After spending all day deep cleaning the rodent and reptile tanks, I'd come home sweaty and tired and smelling of hamster poop. Simon had covered his nose and told me my hair looked like a nest.

In the shower, the water was lukewarm. Simon sat in the bedroom, watching some sitcom at full volume on his phone. I ran my hands through my hair, pushing shampoo through to the roots, when I came across something small and hard. I pinched my fingers down, capturing the thing, and pulled it through a tangle of hair. I thought for sure it was a hair clip I'd forgotten about, but the texture was all wrong, rough, and much too fat to be a bobby pin.

When I pulled the thing from my hair, I made a shrieky animal noise and threw the insect down onto the yellowing bathtub. All I saw was a gray-toned body, a collection of antennae and legs and a ribbed thorax. I made a few more noises of revulsion, gagged a bit. I stuck my hands into my hair, desperate to find out if there were more. My fingernails raked my scalp so hard I found red scratches later.

Simon entered the bathroom. "What? What happened? What's wrong?" he said. He pulled back the shower curtain.

"There was a bug," I said. "Oh God, in my hair. Oh my God." I was still digging my fingers through my hair.

Simon sighed. Then he began to laugh. "Ew."

I glared at him.

"What kind of bug?" he asked.

"I don't know, like a beetle or something. It was huge."

"Where is it?"

I looked down at the bathtub where I'd thrown it down. It wasn't there. The water must have scooped it up and washed it down the drain. We didn't have a drain stopper. The apartment hadn't come with one.

"It's gone now," I said.

"Well, there you go. It can't hurt you if it's drowned in our pipes."

Shampoo dripped into my eyes and began to sting. I wanted to ask Simon to comb through my hair and make sure there was truly nothing there anymore. I wondered, if I asked, if he would take the time to lay my head in his lap and sift through my hair with his fingers, looking at each strand to make sure the bug hadn't laid any tiny eggs. I found the image difficult to picture. And before I could say anything more, Simon turned and walked back out of the room. I heard him start the sitcom back up, the fake laugh track spilling out from the other side of the bathroom.

I washed my hair three more times after that. I rubbed my skin raw with my washcloth. I stayed in there well after the water turned freezing, only coming out when Simon came in to yell at me about wasting water. No matter how hard I washed, I could still feel the bug on me, in my scalp, crawling around the follicles of my hair. Disgust lingered under my skin.

I saw one more clearly a few days after that. I was washing dishes after dinner. Simon was sitting at the table, still picking at the chicken I'd spent hours deboning and roasting and slicing. When I'd asked him to help me clean up the kitchen, he claimed he was exhausted. His meetings that day had burnt him out. His boss had been on his case all day. And I was better at doing the dishes anyway, he said, I never broke glasses or mugs in the sink like he did.

I stood scrubbing at a pot when I looked down and spotted the thing ambling across the countertop. My whole body tensed. I crept closer to look at it. The bug had a mottled gray body, wide and thick like the shape of a pen cap. Its six legs were skinny, bent sharply, and ended in little hook shapes. It had bumps and ridges on its exoskeleton, and it seemed to be covered in a kind of ashy dust like the wings of a moth. I grabbed a fly swatter and killed it. Dumped its broken body into the trash can. It was then that I began to worry we might have an infestation.

I saw so many of them after that. A few weeks later, I saw one slinking underneath the floorboards in the living room. It went right up into the crack of the wall, disappearing entirely. When I got on my hands and knees, I couldn't see anything under any furniture or along the baseboards. But I did notice a thick coating of dust on the hardwood. I ran my finger through it to find that it was slimy and wet.

"Did you spill something in the living room?" I asked Simon. Unlike me, he had yet to see any bugs at all. And he had come home from work irritable as always.

"What?" he asked.

"Did you spill something here?" I repeat, gesturing to the filth. I didn't think he had. I was just ruling it out as a possibility before I blamed the bugs.

"Not every mess in here is my fault," he said, voice sharp.

"I'm not saying it is, I just wanted to know if you knew what it was."

"Well, if the floor is gross then maybe you should just clean it," he said. "I literally just got home, so how could it have been me?"

I frowned. "Okay," I said tightly. "I was just asking."

"And now you're upset. Great. I love coming home to a fight."

He went into our bedroom and slammed the door shut behind him.

I looked back at the oily mess on the ground. I knew the bugs had left it, a trail of residue, a marker of their presence, telling me they weren't going away, no matter how hard I had tried to ignore them. I looked over at our closed bedroom door. I wanted to go in and get him to see the truth of things, to get him to acknowledge our bug problem so that we could hire an exterminator or tent the apartment or do something about it. But I didn't want him to get angrier, so I left him alone, shut away behind our bedroom door.

I had known Simon a long time before we started dating. He had been a friend of a friend. I had known he had a crush on me, but I never thought anything would happen between us. Before him, I had only ever dated quiet men, men who were very bookish and shy, the ones who I met in my organic chemistry lectures. Simon was not like that. Simon knew everyone on our campus, it seemed like. Simon invited people to Kenny's bar every Friday for karaoke and stood on stage to sing "Ring of Fire" to a crowd of people, not a glimmer of self-consciousness in his body. Simon made friends with bouncers and grocery store clerks and professors and parents. Simon threw his arm around people, bought them drinks, and told loud stories about backpacking to everyone at the table because they were all inevitably turned toward him, looking at him, leaning towards him.

I mentioned once that I'd never tried cheesecake, and the very next day, when we all met at the bar, he was carrying a huge, plastic cake container in his hands. When people asked him if he was headed to a potluck, he just smiled and said, "Nope. It's for Melanie."

He charmed the bartenders into allowing us to eat it there, and even got them to give us some forks. We all dug right into the center of it, not caring about portioning it out evenly. Simon didn't take a bite until I did. He watched me bring the fork all the way to my mouth, and

chew, and swallow, his eyes puppy-like and expectant. I had never noticed before then how much I liked his smile.

We had a sort of telepathy. We were closer than most couples. There was more to him than most people got to see. He was quieter when we were alone together. He majored in software engineering, but he seemed to genuinely enjoy listening to me drone on and on about what I was learning in my biology classes. He liked to watch the Met Gala. He ate obsessively healthy, but bought Girl Scout cookies online in bulk. He knew the name of every bird in the Pacific Northwest. He surprised me constantly. I loved him.

When the program that awarded me my scholarship lost funding two semesters before graduating, he was the one who picked me up off my apartment kitchen floor and told me everything would be alright. He held me up. I couldn't afford to register for the rest of the credits I needed, and I couldn't take out any more loans. Simon had just gotten a job in Washington, a cushy one that promised him healthcare and paid vacation time. When we were cooking dinner one night, he asked me to move with him.

"When I've made enough money, you can go back to school. It'll only take a few years, and then you can look for a research position there," he said. "Seattle will be a great place for that."

"I can't ask you to do that," I said. "That's too much."

"When you're a big shot researcher, you can pay me back." He gave a sly smile. "Or, you know, we could always get married. Then, what's mine is yours and all that."

"Don't make jokes right now."

He put down the spatula he was holding and looked at me. "I'm not joking. I want you to come with me to Washington. I want you with me."

We bought two one-way plane tickets up north and found a rundown townhouse on the edge of the city. Seattle was dark, always cloudy. It smelled of fish. Simon proposed a month after we got there. My parents flew to us, and my dad officiated the wedding. We had a lemon cake with raspberry preserve. That was four years ago. Four years gone. I couldn't quite believe so much time had passed so quickly. I wondered where my motivation had gone. Every few weeks, I would pull up applications for community college in Washington. I would stare blankly at the application prompts, my fingers sitting unmoving on the keyboard of my laptop, time ticking by.

Simon did not like it when I brought up the possibility of going back to school. He told me each time that he hated how much I complained about our life. He said it made him feel like I was using him, and that I just wanted to get away from him. He didn't care that it had been his idea, all of it, every last bit of it, including the part where I eventually went back to finish my degree. But now, he said he wanted to start a family, he wanted to have children. He wanted me to quit my job at PetMall and focus on us. He wanted me to be happy. He wanted many things. When I lay in bed at night, listening to the hum of his snores, I felt terrified because when I searched deep inside myself, I could no longer find it in me to want anything at all. There was no engine in me anymore. I was a gutted car, stalled on the side of the road. Most of the time, I felt like I was in a deep sleep, unable to move. I would look at Simon and wonder if I had wasted four years of my life on someone I didn't even really know.

Around the same time I found the slime on the floors, I also began to hear the bugs in the walls. It started as a low humming noise, like the constant up-down chirp of a cricket. The buzz, growing louder every few minutes, came from the other side of our bedroom. I sat up in bed, turned my head towards the sound. It was different from hearing our neighbors—the walls of our

apartment were very thin—because this noise wasn't muffled at all. It was right there beside us. I turned to Simon, who was lying next to me.

"What is that?" I whispered.

He didn't respond. His eyes were closed, but he wasn't asleep. I could tell.

I shook his shoulder, annoyed. "Can you hear that? That buzzing?"

Simon rolled over, moving away from my touch. "Probably just the neighbors," he mumbled.

I got out of bed. The sound got louder, amplified. The insides of my ears tingled. I followed the sound to the far wall of our bedroom, to the inside of our tiny closet. I shoved dirty clothes aside and pressed my fingertips to the wall, felt the vibration travel through my hand and up my arm. The hum reminded me of summer in Georgia with my grandparents. Every tree would be covered in cicadas. Their curled bodies attached themselves to the bark, and they emitted one singular song. The buzz of them would rise up, making the whole neighborhood sound like it was underwater. With my head stuck inside the closet, I pulled clothes off hangers and ripped out our shoe organizer. I threw pants and skirts over my shoulder, searching for any sign of the bugs or their nest, but I didn't find anything. Eventually, I returned to bed. The sound echoed through the room for the whole night. I kept my head beneath the blanket, pressing the soft down against my ear, until I finally fell into unsteady sleep.

The noise went away sometimes, allowing me a blissful moment of quiet, but it remained more often than not. At night, I wandered around, trying to pin down the source of the noise. I would always come back to bed frustrated and half-asleep. I did not know how the sound did not get to Simon. He went about his days, unbothered. When I pointed out the sound, he brushed me off, stuck his headphones into his ears, so I knew the conversation was over. I decided that the

bugs must have been in the walls somewhere, hiding, and that was how the sound of them surrounded me from all sides. I spent a lot of time watching the three walls of our apartment, eyes trained on the plaster, so that I could be ready when one of them skittered across to reveal their location. They must have been breeding. The noise had to be made up of hundreds of them.

I caught one once. I had been sitting at the triangular table, sipping a mug of coffee, when I glanced down and froze. There, crawling across the wood, putting one jagged leg in front of another, was one of them. Its dusty body left a trail of black soot behind. Its body was plump, like it had just fed on something, and its antenna swiveled back and forth slowly, maybe sensing I was there above it. I captured it with a glass mason jar and held it up to the light. I examined it from all angles, its striated underbelly, its little pointed head, its skinny legs and knobby joints. I thought maybe I would hate the little guy, want to kill it, but I just set the jar back down on the table. When I looked at it, it wasn't hate that stirred. It was something I'd never felt before, something harder to place, tender and violent at the same time.

When Simon came home that day, I tried to show him the jar. I hoped the evidence would finally make him listen to me, but when I picked up the jar, it was empty. The top was still sealed shut, but the bug was definitely gone. I turned the jar upside down and put it up real close to my face. Simon sighed when I said it must have escaped somehow. I tried to tell him we had to search for it together.

"Or maybe," he said, slow, like I was incredibly stupid. "It was never there in the first place."

I walked into the kitchen where the jar had been sitting. I began to lift up dishes and pots. I opened the cabinets and began to rummage through the plates and bowls. It had to be there somewhere. My hands shook.

“Will you stop?” Simon said. He came into the kitchen behind me. Because of the triangular shape of our kitchen, his body blocked the entire entrance. His figure, a door, shutting me in.

I turned to face him. “Did you ever check the sink pipes? I still think that might be where they’re coming from.”

“No, I didn’t have time to check the pipes for imaginary bugs. I was already late for work this morning because you kept me up last night with your pacing around.”

“You couldn’t have taken one minute to check for me?” I asked.

“Why didn’t you do it? You had the whole day off.”

“I just thought you could do this one thing for me if I asked.”

“There are no bugs,” Simon said. “I’m sick of talking about this all the time. You’re being psychotic.”

My face burned. I turned from him. “Fine. I’ll check them myself.”

I knelt down and reached for the cabinet door directly underneath the sink. The white PVC piping inside was red with rust.

“Don’t touch that. You’ll mess something up,” Simon said. I ignored him.

Water dripped from one of the curved tubes. A small puddle pooled on the wood below. I touched a finger to the leaking pipe, and it was burning hot. When I pulled my hand away, it was ashy with the same slimy substance I’d found on the floor of the living room.

“Are you finding any?” Simon asked from above me. “Are they down there?”

I looked up at him. He stood with his weight back on his heels, one arm stretched to lean on the counter above me. His eyebrows were raised, his lips pursed into a perfect line, the face he wore when he was amused. But there was a cruelness there that I had never seen before. His

features were soured, all wrong, the veins and muscles in his face tight. His eyes were dark, and he stared down at me.

"Find their secret lair?" he asked.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I only got far enough to take a slight intake of breath before I froze. My eyes had traveled down to the neckline of Simon's shirt and caught there. Something moved along Simon's collar, across folded fabric, towards the curve of his shoulder. One of them. I tilted my head to make sure it wasn't a trick of the dim kitchen light, but the bug didn't fade or vanish. I stared, slack-jawed, lips still parted, the words I had been about to spit back to him growing stale, unspoken. The bug crawled down Simon's pale blue work shirt and made its way across the valleys and mountains of cotton, towards his forearm.

"Don't move," I said softly.

Simon's eyes narrowed. "What?"

I rose from the floor as slow and swift as I could. "Don't move."

I must have looked crazed because Simon pulled away from me, his lips pulled back in disgust.

"You've got one," I said.

As if in a trance, I reached out my hand. Perhaps I wanted to brush it back into a mason jar, seal it tightly away so that I would have proof once again of their existence. Perhaps I wanted to flick it off of Simon, save him from the disgusting sludge that the bug was no doubt leaving behind on his shirt. Perhaps I wanted to pet it, to feel its spines beneath the pads of my fingertips to confirm for myself it was solid and real. I didn't have a plan. My hand moved on its own, fingers outstretched for the bug.

Simon's hand shot out and grabbed my wrist before I could reach it. His grip was tight. My hand stilled, brought to a complete stop by the force of him.

"Stop," he said. "Fucking stop, Melanie."

I looked down at his knuckles turning white against the flesh of my wrist. I did not try to pull away or continue to reach towards him.

"You're hurting me," I said.

He looked down, as if realizing for the first time that he had a hold of me. He dropped my wrist. When he looked back up, he looked like he was about to say something, and then changed his mind. He shook his head.

We watched each other for a moment, both of us waiting for the other to speak. Years passed. If I wanted to leave the kitchen, I would have had to brush past him, squeeze between the side of him and the countertop. So I did not move. He turned suddenly, leaving me behind in the kitchen. I forgot to check to see if the bug was still clinging onto his button-down or if it had fallen off and landed on the tiled floor. In the walls around me, I could hear the bugs beginning to come to life for the night. The hum grew louder and louder as I stood there until the noise was practically a scream.

That night, I spent a long time in the bathroom getting ready for bed. The triangle mirror just above the sink made everything in it look just barely distorted, cone-shaped, even my head. I stared into it most nights and twisted my head back and forth, examining my skin, my nose, my tongue. I would run my hands along the sides of my face, feeling the bump of my cheekbones and dip of my temples. Within the mirror, with the shapes all curved wrong, my head always looked so moldable, so easily manipulated. I brushed my teeth to the melody of the bugs just beyond the wall. My thoughts grew distant, everything was distant. My mind had drifted away.

When I wandered back into the bedroom, Simon sat upright on his side of the bed, propped up by the headboard and a pillow. He read from a book with a bright red cover. He looked at me. His eyes were soft again, the way I knew them from years ago when we first met. I crawled into the bed to lie beside him, and he wrapped one arm around me. Exhaustion had seeped into my body, and I finally let myself feel the weight of it. It had been so long since I slept through an entire night. I let myself lean into Simon's form. I'd always liked the heat of him. He placed his book face down on the bed and turned his face to mine.

"Sleep is all you need," he said. "A good night's sleep."

A thousand responses came to mind. I wanted to ask him how he could not hear the hum of this place. I wanted to plead with him, ask him to trust me enough to move away from here. If he could not feel the way this place gnawed at us, could not see the infestation, then he would have to commit an act of pure faith. I wanted to tell him how much I longed to go back to school. I wanted to sit in the front of a lecture hall and chew mint gum and listen to my professor patiently repeat answers to questions that had already been answered. I wanted to introduce myself to professors and sit in their offices and read the tiny print on the certificates hung up on the wall behind them.

All of these things were right there on the tip of my tongue, but they got lodged somewhere in my teeth. I couldn't get them out. Simon was not listening anyway. He leaned his head down to touch his lips to mine. I kissed him back and opened my mouth against his. The kiss was instinctive, automatic. My mind was somewhere else. His hand traveled down my back. In my mouth, his breath, sour and alcoholic, swelled and disappeared.

Then, as Simon leaned in closer, something solid and unfamiliar slipped into my mouth. Transferred from his tongue to mine, forced into my mouth. The object was small and jagged,

made of a ribbed shell and pointy ends. It had an ashy flavor. My mouth filled with saliva. Whatever it was shifted on its own, alive, moving deeper into my mouth. I felt what I knew were little legs digging into the meat of my tongue.

I gagged, jerking away from Simon. I did not even pause to see his expression. Instead, I dragged myself up and away from the bed, stumbling as my feet hit the solid floor. I stuck a hand into my mouth, desperate to grab the bug and get it out of my mouth before it could crawl any farther into my body. I lurched myself into the dark bathroom. My knees bent, and I folded in two. Panic wound its way through my body as my hand clawed at the inside of my mouth, pinching air. The bug avoided my fingers. It crept over my tongue, deft and fast. I felt it begin to descend down. It was just small enough to fit, but my throat contracted, my body trying to save me from the intrusion. I gagged again. Water filled my eyes.

Distantly, I heard Simon's voice. "What happened? What the hell?"

The bug did not care that it was choking me. It crawled all the way down into my chest, a painful lump in my esophagus like a too-big bite of bread swallowed too fast. The bug landed somewhere in my chest, somewhere deep inside of me, and nestled in. It twisted and squirmed. My hands pressed against my chest, grabbing at nothing but my own skin. I couldn't get to it.

Slowly, I straightened up and looked at my red face in the bathroom mirror. My eyes were liquidy from gagging. All around me, I could hear their incessant buzzing. I tore my gaze away from myself and began to pound at the wall behind the sink with my fists. A sound escaped me, a cry, something guttural. They were taunting me. I couldn't think straight.

Simon called my name somewhere behind me. He said *Melanie! Melanie!* His voice was an irritating whistle cutting through the thrum of the bugs. I stopped my pounding, struck by revelation. *Melanie, Melanie, Melanie.* My name became nothing in his mouth. A useless three

syllable sound. *Melanie, Melanie, Melanie.* I remembered how he used to whisper it against my temple in the dark, like it was keeping him alive to say it. I thought of the bug transferred from his tongue onto mine. I stumbled away from the mirror and wall. They were coming from him. I felt sick, like throwing up my guts onto the floor. Acid in my stomach churned. The bugs were coming from him. Feeding on everything in here, feeding on me, hiding somewhere within—in the woodwork bones of the place.

I turned to face him, but my vision was blurry, so I couldn't see if he was looking back at me. I shoved my way past him, through the threshold of the bathroom and out into the living room. The three walls of our apartment were pulsing. They were the loudest they'd ever been. How could the neighbors not hear? How did the people out on the street not come running? Didn't they hear? My head pounded from the pressure of it. I had to find them, finally, and kill them. That was the only way I'd ever be free. I had to get rid of them. And then, when I got away, the bugs would have nowhere to settle in, nowhere to play their angry song.

I knew Simon kept his toolbox in the storage closet, and I knew there was a hammer in there, a real sturdy one with lots of weight to it. I took it out and let the rest of the toolbox fall to the ground. A crash of metal and hard plastic hitting the hardwood. I took myself over to the longest wall, the hypotenuse wall, and lifted the hammer up over my head. As I brought it down, time seemed to slow. I knew exactly how the plaster would sound when it cracked. I knew exactly how the hammer would bite quarter-sized holes into it, and then make it into one, gaping window. Apprehension rose inside me. It must be the most beautiful feeling in the entire world, the moment right before bringing everything down. I opened my mouth as I did it, ready to cry out or scream.

The hammer crashed into the wall, and as it did, the drywall splintered. A blissful shattering of the monotony in the bug's call. I smiled at the sound of it, grinned an open-mouthed grin, my tongue hanging out, tasting the dust of the wall as it wafted off. I could see the bugs. Here they were. They were everywhere, in every crevice and in between every piece of paneling. They skittered to the sides as soon as the light touched them, so I kept going. I brought the hammer down again, and again, and again. Simon shouted behind me, something about how I needed to stop, how I was a crazy bitch, how we were going to be arrested for destroying the apartment. I just kept swinging the hammer into new spots on the wall. Chunks of wall and rubble rained down onto our triangle couch.

Simon grabbed the hammer when I lifted it again. He forced the weapon out of my hand and held it away from my reach. I didn't care. Of course, he'd try to stop me from getting rid of them. If he had his way, I would stay here in between these three walls, and the rooms would fill with insect legs, and I would lie down on the couch among them, letting them do whatever they wanted with me. I did not even turn to get the hammer back. I didn't need it. My hands moved as they wanted, and they went after the wall. I tore huge pieces of the wall down onto the floor. Razor pink insulation bit into me, but I kept going. I grabbed at swarms of the bugs, smashed their little bug bodies in the palms of my fists. Wet guts and yellow blood seeped out through my fingers. There were thousands of them. They crawled over each other in an attempt to get away from me, but there was nowhere left to hide. Bits of the wall fell into my hair, into my eyes. I knew I was still smiling, pushing out a choking, breathless laugh.

Distantly, I registered that Simon had moved away from me. He spoke to someone, perhaps he was on the phone. I did not stop to listen. My mind was blissfully blank. I heard nothing but the sound of ripping paint. I felt nothing but the sting in my hands, the glorious sting

of finally doing something. The bug in my chest, which raked against my insides, angry, would be the last one I tried to kill. Perhaps it would be impossible to get it out. Perhaps that one would stay with me, buried deep inside, unless I wanted to dig my hands into my sternum and pull it out with something sharp and serrated. Perhaps I would have to learn to live with it. It didn't matter, as long as all these other ones were dead and gone. When I was done killing them, I would be fresh and new. I would go back to school. I would want again. I would move to a new apartment and walk up to new people and say my name to them. As I tore everything down, powdery grit settled into the grooves of my smile.

The Calder House

The clock in the hallway is upside down. The clock has a wood border and thin, simple hands. It hangs above a group of paintings and beside the oak bookshelves in the hallway leading to the dining room. The clock has been hung much too high for me to take down and fix myself. In its round, cream-colored background, the six, which resembles a nine, floats up at the top, and the twelve sits sunk like a dead fish at the bottom. Below the clock is a collection of paintings set into golden frames, hung in perfect balance with each other, Monet and Caravaggio, and Degas. The bookshelf to the left is full of knick-knacks, silver antiques, a tiny lion statue, four hand-painted China plates. I like to look at them. I spend lots of time in the hallway, on my way to the dining room, looking at these things. They used to belong to Mr. and Mrs. Calder, all of them left here by both of them. They are mine now. Sometimes, I take down the paintings or the objects in the bookshelves and hold them in my hands, feel the cool gloss of ceramic and dried paint. I spend hours in front of the upside-down clock, feeling time go round and round the wrong way, asking the things in the hallway where they came from and if they like the Calder house, petting them on the head like little dogs.

I have become a very strange woman. I say become because I have not always been this way, there was a different life I knew before this one, which was once very clear and is now cloudy. I know this the way I know other simple things, like how I know when my tea is too hot to drink and the way I know the roads in the first city I lived in. Become implies some kind of transformation, which is the best way I can describe what has happened to me. I think of chubby, green caterpillars curling themselves up in a paper-thin sleeve. Tiny, little life, waiting, patient, to become something stranger with wings. It's quite hard to think these days of anything at all, so when vivid images such as these come to mind, I grab onto them quick. I let the shape of the

image settle in my mind, concentrate on keeping it there, pause to admire it. A caterpillar hanging in its shell from the branch of a tree. I think of my body, curled in upon itself, elbows tucked between my legs, wet with fluid. I have a pang of fear that when I emerge, I will not be something colorful with wings, but an ashen monster, more leg than wing, crumbly and frail. When I peel out of my chrysalis, I will fall to the earth, limp, unable to even crawl. My body will flake away into nothing. When the images in my mind turn sour like this, which they often do, I banish them. These days, I only wish to think of beautiful things.

Will seems to think that my changing began when I became sick. He looks at me all sad sometimes, and his eyes search mine for long moments at a time, like he does not quite recognize me. He says my sickness is the reason for the fog in my mind, the reason I have trouble remembering things. He touches me often to bring me back to myself; his fingers will brush my shoulder, or he will cup the back of my head with his hand. It is good to have Will around. He takes care of me. He pours my medicine into a measuring cup for me to swallow. It's supposed to heal my vocal cords, which have been ravaged the most by this sickness, shredded. The back of my throat often feels like an open wound. He lets hot water pool in the bathtub and brings a chair into the bathroom so I can sit in the humid air, which soothes my throat and makes the inside of me all mushy and soft. He does not complain, not even on the days when I cannot speak at all and I have to mouth my words to him, when he has to look closely at the shape of my lips to translate my thoughts.

I've been sick for a very long time. My old doctor, the one whose face I only vaguely remember, told me it was unusual that antibiotics weren't working and that he didn't know what to do next. Will sat beside me in the doctor's office, jaw clenching and unclenching, tearing up a little paper coffee cup, as the doctor explained they had done all the tests they could. When I try

to recall the exact details of what he said to us, I only remember the little bits of coffee cup coming apart in Will's hands. One of the pieces dropped to the floor, a little white scrap against the perfect beige carpet.

So Will claims my sickness is the cause for all the ways I am changing. But I know he is wrong about that. My changing is a glorious thing, not something born of disease. It is a gift, given to me by the Calder House, a thank you for taking such good care of it. Though now that I think of it, perhaps the sickness is a gift too, and I simply have to wait for the beauty of it, the reason for it, to reveal itself to me. All good things require a little pain, isn't that what they say? I wonder if a caterpillar winces in its chrysalis as new body parts erupt from its skin.

I trust whatever the Calder House is doing to me. After all, the Calder House has already made my mind the most amazing thing. Will says I have trouble remembering things, which might be true, but he doesn't understand. I am more now. I *notice* more. My focus is heightened, not on silly, unimportant things of the past, but on things in the true present. My mind has cut away all its useless parts to make room for this focus. I think of a man with a beard in the woods taking my brain and cleaving it in two with an ax like he would with a piece of firewood. The wonderous fog of the house fills the empty space left behind, fills my empty head, and I am happy. Birds come to my window, and as I feed them out of the palm of my hand, I notice the intricate colors in their feathers, silvers and golds, and bottomless blues. I plant flowers in the garden out back, and even though I've never had a green thumb before, they spring up days later, fully bloomed.

I make discoveries. I am like a scientist. For example, I found the thing under the floorboards only a week or so after we moved in. I care for it. Every day, I learn something more about it. I keep it a secret from Will because I am afraid he would not understand. These

changes, my focus and my discoveries, these changes are new and beautiful, and I know the cause of them is entirely because of our move last winter into the Calder House.

The Calder House became mine the moment I stepped inside. Despite the many complaints I once had about staying there, they all disappeared the second I unpacked my things in the upstairs bedroom, the second I laid out my clothes in the gorgeous maple dressers. I remember I looked around the living room, my feet sinking into the plush rug, and I knew the house would be mine until the day I died. I have never bought into things like fate or divine power before that moment, but I suddenly believed, standing there, that the events of my life had somehow led me to this place. I felt swallowed by it. Of course, the house was not mine, not technically. I would have never even seen the place if not for Will.

Will's father passed away last winter, which did not come as a shock as he'd been ailing for a long while. We had not known much about his last few years because the man was reclusive, never called. The few times we heard about how he was doing were thanks to Will's mother, Bea Calder, a sweet woman whom I'd only met once over the years and who wrote us letters in perfect cursive that always insisted they were doing fine and not to worry. Will did not cry when he was told over the phone that his father had finally taken his last breath. He only went to the funeral to be there for his mother, and afterward, he only stayed to help her move into a retirement home and make sure she was handling the transition alright.

When Will returned from the funeral, he had this crazed look in his eyes. Glassy, lit-up eyes. I remember them so well, even now. I thought maybe he'd had some cathartic revelation while attending the funeral for the man who'd once smashed his toy train set in front of him and threw him out of the house at seventeen. I remember I hugged Will. I expected him to cry or melt into my arms. I got ready to tell him it was okay to mourn a man you had not spoken to in years,

it was your right to mourn your father, even if he was not a good man. Grief is a ledge you get pushed off of. I got ready to validate any kind of emotion that came out of him. But he'd pulled away from me and looked at me with those bright, tearless eyes.

"You'll never believe this," he'd said.

In Mr. Calder's will, the man had left Will the house where he and his sister, Jackie, had grown up. The family manor in Bissmount, the suburban town on the other side of the mountain. The same house where Mr. Calder had lived for sixty-one years before he died last October. Will had not been back to the house since he'd been forced out at seventeen with nothing but two suitcases and a mouth full of braces. He never expected to receive anything in the will, let alone the entire house. I cannot really recall the exact reservations I had about the whole ordeal now, but I do remember we had a long conversation about it. I had been shocked that he wanted to move in there at all.

"Won't that be weird for you?" I asked. "Living in the house you grew up in."

"Sure, maybe," he said. "I'm not saying we should move in forever. But we should check it out, don't you think? I mean, we're never going to get an opportunity like this again."

"It's so far away," I said. Now, I remember. I did not want to commute so far to my job. What a silly thing to be worried about. My mind used to be a very slippery thing, full of silly anxieties.

"It's a huge house," he countered. "I've always wanted to inherit it. I just never thought he'd actually give it up. I thought he'd let it rot before he ever gave it to me."

"Why do you think he did?" I asked.

"I don't know." Will shrugged. "I don't care. Maybe he lost his mind near the end."

"Maybe we should sell it," I suggested.

When I recall this conversation, I linger on the words I spoke. Back then, before we moved in, they were still clear and measured. This was before I became sick. Now, my voice comes out in sparks. Now, my voice is jagged. I took it for granted back then, suggested many things, said things just for the sake of it. That is one thing, perhaps the only thing, which I miss from the time before: unbroken words.

We'd fought about the house for a while. I wanted to put it up on the market, buy a house we chose, perhaps put the leftover money in a savings account for a future child. Will was hell-bent on at least giving the place a chance. Will and I rarely fought, so we did it clumsily. Neither of us had enough bite. There were too many apologies and 'I hear you's. Even when I tried to get a rise out of him, when I tried to tell him he was selfish for wanting us to move there and that it would not give him a childhood he never had, I couldn't quite get the words out. I stopped mid-sentence. He looked at me, expecting me to continue. So trusting. Not a single part of him expected me to say something so cheap. I didn't want to see the words hit him, so I did not say them. Eventually, we decided to move into the Calder House, and now, I would have it no other way. I am glad for the house. It had been waiting for me. Silly of me to fight it. Silly of me to think of this time before the move at all. When I remember how useless the memories of before are, I banish them from my mind.

The first time I saw the Calder house, it struck me as funny how out of place it seemed. In a neighborhood of ordinary suburban houses, tucked away at the end of the cul-de-sac and at the top of the hill, stood the wide, mossy house. It was twice as big as the other houses, made completely of brick and foliage. The house had multiple faces, sections jutting out on the left and right sides. Windows dotted every inch of the house. It was a tight, rigid structure, and besides the vines which grew freely across it, everything else seemed to tilt away from it. The trees on

either side had grown at an angle. The branches reached away, towards the open air, like they were trying to grab onto something for purchase, to pull themselves away. I would have thought it was funny how cartoonishly haunted it looked if I didn't feel a pit opening up in my stomach. I imagine myself, a caterpillar, crawling up the stone steps, into the house, my chrysalis.

The Calder house had been mine for nine months now. I do keep track of time, even though it is hard. There is a calendar hanging on the fridge, which helps. The time of day is much easier to follow. I watch the upside-down clock for it to tell me what I should be doing. I got sick sometime right after the move. It started slow, a mere cold, and then became hopeless. We checked the house for mold, the dishes for lead, we checked everything. My sickness has no answers. The sting in my throat and chest get worse, then better, then worse again, constantly fluctuating. I used to do the hour-long commute to my job back on the other side of the mountain, but only for a few months because my job quickly became a thing of the past. I stay indoors, except for the garden out back. The house likes me in it. It has become very hard for me to ever leave. I do the same things every day. I have become a very strange woman with a strict routine.

Every morning after making the bed and every night before brushing my teeth, I take the pillow soft duster and trace the edges of the floor. In the house, everything seems to snatch up dust. Gray wafts of the stuff appear out of nowhere. It collects itself on the furniture and the elaborate display of silver antiques in the bookshelves beside the upside-down clock. It gathers in the corners of the rooms where walls meet. It joins crumbs under the kitchen counters to create little dusty snacks that might be appealing for rats if I didn't sweep it right up every day. The dust, if settled for too long, would take over the entire house. The place would become one giant dust ball, immovable, growing wider and wider until it overtook the entire neighborhood. Every

time I dust, I save my neighbors from being suffocated in their sleep. I enjoy saving them. I herd up all the dust bunnies with my trusty feather duster, like a shepherd gathering up his sheep. If there are dust bunnies, I wondered, then surely there must be dust sheep, dust cows, dust men. I smile and pour all my little dust sheep into the trash can.

Every day after I dust, I wash up the windows. They are always getting streaky with grime. It is as if the house wants the windows to turn brown and opaque so nothing can see in or out. I kneel on the couch or stand on my ladder and spray my chemicals on the glass, wipe away soot and marks until the glass is so clear that birds might mistake it for nothing. There are twenty-five windows, which was a large number for the size of the house, but I was glad for the number. More to wash. More to brighten the cool hallways of the house.

Every day, I feed myself and I feed the thing under the floor. All living things need food to breathe. I make myself a slice of toast with butter or jam, and I prepare the creature its very own meal. It is around this time of the day when the thing begins to kick and howl until I bring it its breakfast. It had been a mistake to ever feed it, I know that now, because while I believe it must have once been able to live without any sustenance at all—perhaps it was not truly alive then—it now seems to rely on me for food. I recall a park sign I once saw when I was eleven while camping with my mother: Do not feed the deer. Feeding the deer will cause a harmful dependence on humans.

I hear the thing under the floor shuffling about, limbs scratching at the dirt and concrete of its hole. It shrieks in a voice that sounds almost human. Sometimes it moans like a whale. I am unsure how it makes the noises it does because it has no tongue or teeth, or mouth. When it makes these awful sounds, I do my best to prepare its food quickly. I feed the thing with no mouth fruit and cheese and vegetables. Raspberries like clusters of little red rubies. Honeydew

with the rind cut away. Cubed cucumber. Veiny, blue cheese crumbling in my hand. A sliced dark purple plum.

I take the creature's food, and I go to the dining room where I can hear the upside-down clock in the hallway. I push the dining table out of the way, which takes quite a bit of effort. I pull the extravagant red carpet to the side. Carved into the wood floors, there is a little four-foot-wide square. A door. The edges of the wood are splitting as if whoever had made the door slashed away at the hardwood with a saw and no plan. The door has no handle. To open it, I take the flat side of my metal spatula and pry it up, heave the top over so that it falls wide open. The hole underneath the door must be about eight feet deep, and it goes straight down into the earth. At the very bottom, there is a tiny room made of concrete and exposed plywood. The thing with no mouth sits at the bottom of the hole, just small enough to fit inside, its body contorting into strange shapes to accommodate the concrete walls.

The creature's pale skin is pulled taut in strange places, stretched, practically forced over bone and muscle, sagging in areas where there does not seem to be any bone at all. It has many limbs, each one fleshy and thick. Over the creature's backside, it seems to have a growth of dark scaly skin. A shell of protective tissue that it does not need because it is already protected by the wooden trap door always placed above its head. The creature has a thick head, just as large as its body, and a muscular jaw. It swivels its head up at me when I lift away the trapdoor. The face is blank, pure skin, featureless. No opening, no mouth. The sounds it makes seem to emanate from deep within its torso. The only way I know the head is a head is because it has two tiny slits which move around like eyes. I shine a flashlight down there to see it better, but I do not shine it directly onto it because that would surely be rude. I assume it does not like much light.

I drop the clementines I peeled this morning down into the hole. The creature makes a noise unlike its shrieks from before, a happier sound, the one I have come to associate with the thing's contentment. It captures up the pieces of clementine using its many legs and pushes the fruit against the side of its body. I lay myself down on the ground of the dining room, my head hanging over the side of the hole, to watch better. I love watching it eat. The clementine dissolves into the creature's skin like smoke into a screen door. I think of cotton candy melting in the sun. I have yet to find a food that the creature cannot absorb. I wonder what eating with no mouth might feel like. I wonder if it can taste the tartness of the clementine, feel the skin of a grape burst, smell the stink of cheddar just before it is swallowed.

When the creature is done eating, it quiets down. The body softens, it sinks down into its hole. It becomes so still that I think it must be asleep. I close the trapdoor and return all the furniture back into the proper places. Will does not know about the creature. He works all day on the other side of the mountain, and he comes home late every night. For all of his talk about wanting to be in the Calder House, he has not taken to it the same way I have. I do not know if he has been changing like I have been changing. I do sometimes find him wandering around the house, looking at the walls, his nails in his mouth, biting. He cocks his head to look at certain paintings on the walls and sculptures in the bookshelves. He, too, sometimes watches the upside-down clock, and even though he is tall enough, he never fixes it either. He goes into the bedroom that once belonged to him as a child and stays there for many hours, until I call for him to come get dinner. I want to tell him about the thing under the floor, but I am afraid that if I try to show anyone the trapdoor, the hole underneath it will be empty when I open it. A silly fear, I know. But still, I do not speak of it. I do not show him.

Every day, after I dust and wash windows and feed my creature, I boil myself a pot of water, and then I lean directly over it with a towel placed over my head. The humidity is supposed to be good for my throat and lungs. The hot air does feel nice, it feels nice to sit at the table under a dark towel. But sometimes, when I sit there under my towel, letting my throat soak in the moist air, my thoughts wander to my life before. Even though it is silly, sometimes I allow it to happen. This is the only time I ever find myself thinking about it anymore. I think of my old childhood room. Pink walls with glowing stars, a stuffed elephant that sang a song when I pulled a cord, a pile of worn leather boots. I repeat to myself the names of my parents, who live in Wisconsin. I think of my roommate in college who played the cello and called me Katy instead of Katherine, who had thick bangs and could cook salmon perfectly. I think of Will, my sweet Will, who is gentle even though his father was cruel, who likes medieval poetry and tea with heaps of sugar. Will, who'd spent his entire childhood in this house and lived with the pale thing under the floor for much longer than I have.

Under the wet towel, I form words into the air. I speak, or try to. My voice is raspy and raw because of my sore throat. I practice making the sounds that used to come easy. I used to speak for a living. I used to commute to the other side of the mountain to speak. Sitting under this towel, so secluded in my speaking, makes me think of my old recording room. Foam soundproof blocks on the walls. A keypad with thousands of buttons. My little Darth Vader figurine taped to the top of my desktop computer. The bright red light that meant we were on air. Leo, my old co-host sitting a few feet from me, telling me about how his daughter almost exploded their microwave. These memories come to me, but it is hard to hang onto them. Under the towel, I remember the name of what I used to be, the way your mind conjures the lyrics of a song you used to belt years ago. Radio host. I used to come on air at 6 am and tell the entire city

about local sports teams winning championships and about little girls using lemonade stands to raise money for cancer research. I read ads and introduced musicians. I spoke.

That was before I got sick. After we moved in and after the wounds appeared on the inside of my throat, I ran out of sick leave very quickly. I got fired on a Monday morning. My boss, a pug-nosed man—I cannot recall his name no matter how hard I try—told me my studio was regretfully letting me go.

"The studio is beginning to receive complaints," he'd said. "You know, about your voice."

Listeners didn't like the grate of my voice. It had already grown irrepairably rough and hoarse. I coughed too often into the microphone. People did not want to hear it on their car radios as they drove to work in the morning. It upset them.

"We hope you find the help you need," my boss had said.

Weeks later, I heard they hired a man with a well-groomed mustache to replace me. His voice was like butter, smooth, softened. I can't remember if I'd been angry at my boss when he fired me. I'm sure I must have been, but now, I can't conjure up any anger about it at all. Mostly, the memory just sits in my chest, lingers in my lungs, somewhere amid the soreness. When I think of my old recording room, tears well up in my eyes, but I do not cry. I just take off the towel and remove my face from the steaming water. When I return to the cool air of the house, I feel normal again. I no longer think of these lost things. I return to my routines.

On Saturdays, we leave the house. Will and I put on our presentable outfits, and we get in the car to weave down the winding mountain pass and meet up with Will's sister, Jackie. We meet her at the little outdoor market where farmers sell fresh produce and where bakeries peddle boxes of muffins. It is one of the only times I leave the house nowadays. I do love Jackie, and I

do love the outdoor market, but leaving the house makes me feel like my heart has been doused in cold water. My muscles go tight, and sweat beads across my upper lip. I am a planet pulled away from its orbit. Whenever we leave, I watch Will carefully for any similar signs of distress, any signs that he feels even slightly the way I am feeling, but he is always his normal self. His shoulders are loose, and he is quick to smile. He doesn't share my sense of doom.

Jackie greets us in the heart of the market. Her arms are full with a loaf of sourdough in a paper bag and a huge leather purse. Jackie is the opposite of Will, fluffy blonde hair, blue eyes, and a booming voice. She is always getting stopped by a million people downtown, people who call her name and stop to speak to her. She knows everyone. I used to know lots of people, but now I feel like a waif in the crowd. I think I have spent too long alone with only the company of my creature. I never seem to know how to make conversation now. Jackie links her arm around mine, opens the bread bag to let me smell the warm cooked yeast. We walk through the market, arm in arm, Will trailing behind us.

"So, how is that house treating you?" she asks after a while.

I put on a smile. "It's nice," I say. "I think we are finally settling in." I have to focus on creating the proper words without my voice cracking, and even then, every word is strained.

She hums, thoughtful. "I thought for sure you two would decide to sell by now."

When we decided to move into the Calder House, Jackie had been just as against it as I had been, only she never underwent the same transformations as me. She still believes our move is peculiar. When she came over the night right after we moved in, she sat at the dining table the entire time, refusing to look around at anything or step into any other room. She drank red wine, and it stained her teeth a light pink.

“Doesn’t it give you the creeps?” she whispered to me across the table when Will was in the kitchen opening another bottle.

I shrugged. By this point, I no longer saw any issue with us moving in. The place had already welcomed me into it, only a few days in. Its strange colors and intricate rugs soothed me, and I liked the feel of my hands on the rough edge of the table. I could already feel a sense of peace, the beginning of my transformation. The cells of my blood were in perfect sync with the specks of dust floating through the house’s hallway arteries and veins. This was a few days before I would discover my creature under the floor.

“It’s not so bad. Maybe it will be good for us,” I remember saying.

Jackie looked at the kitchen to make sure Will wasn’t coming in. “It’s masochistic is what it is. I can’t believe he can even stand being here.”

“I think he wants to reflect,” I said. “He wants closure.”

Jackie had scoffed. “Then he should get a therapist. Moving into our father’s dusty old sore of a house is not going to do shit for him. And I know Will. He’s just as scared of this house as he was when he was eight years old.” She leaned forward in her chair. Her wine glass splashed a little bit of wine onto the tabletop. “You got to get him to see how insane this is. Y’all should dump this place on someone else and find somewhere nice to go. Somewhere normal.”

I had nodded, probably told her I would do just that, but my eyes were stuck on the splotch of wine on my beautiful wood tabletop, my hands itching to clean it up.

I always wonder what she meant by that, what she meant by ‘somewhere normal’. *I* knew Calder house was nothing normal, it was a cradle, a provenance, it was my beloved chrysalis, but she had said it like it was someplace horrible, someplace diseased. I know Jackie is disappointed by how long we have stayed at the Calder House, so I always try to assure her that we enjoy it

there. I wonder if Jackie knows how special the house truly is, if she knows anything about my creature under the floor.

In the marketplace, I find my mind spiraling. Surely, she knows something about the creature, she must. Perhaps she knows where it came from, maybe who stuck it underground in the first place. She leads us through the vendor stalls, looking forward, eyes wandering across pottery vases and homemade jewelry. Will is still behind us, just out of earshot. I turn to face her as she stops to examine a bushel of roses at one of the booths.

"Jackie," I say. My voice is almost too hoarse to be heard over the buzz of the market.

She does not look up from her flowers. "Yeah?"

"Did you ever hear anything strange under the floors?" I ask.

She processes, looks over to me with her mouth partly open. "At the house?"

"Yes."

"Oh no. Did the ghosts finally decide to come out for you?" she asks. She pokes her elbow into my gut. "They're probably excited to have some fresh meat. Probably got sick of trying to scare my old man."

"I'm serious," I say.

She gives an uncomfortable laugh. "I *am* being serious. Okay, yes, it may not be like *Shining* haunted, but I used to hear creepy shit all the time when I was little. Like banging and these strange voices. I used to get nightmares all the time. And my friends never came over after school, let me tell you."

"What did your parents think?"

Jackie shook her head. "Our dad told us it was just the wood 'settling' or whatever that means. He was a mean, old bastard about it. Used to tell Will to shut up for crying when he got

scared. Will would come to my room at night, and we'd put blankets down in front of the crack of the door to block out the noise. Or maybe so nothing could look in and see us. I don't really remember why."

Will has never told me any of this before. If he has, I have forgotten it. For a moment, I am frightened of what else I may have forgotten.

"And your mother?"

"Our mom was quiet. And she had this huge imagination," Jackie stops to think. "She used to sit downstairs in the middle of the floor with her eyes closed and sing. Sometimes, she'd put me on her lap when she did. She'd tell me we were singing to make sure the 'souls buried in the ground' didn't feel lonely. Fucking terrifying thing for a ten-year-old to hear. She struggled a lot when we were young, like mentally. I think she was afraid of everything in that house, ghost or not."

I think of my creatures' misshapen gray form. A soul trapped under the feet of a family. Jackie may not know about its existence, but it sounds like Bea Calder knew about it. She sang to it. My creature knew the sound of her voice.

That night, when Will is snoring beside me in bed, I hear crying coming from downstairs. Deeper than downstairs even, it's coming from below the ground floor. It is not like the simple wail of a baby. It hiccups and cracks. It whines like an injured animal. It scrapes hard limbs against rock. It shouldn't be possible to hear it so well from up here, but I do. The hairs on my arms raise as I twist my head to hear it better. I think of a wolf, its fur hacked off, a bleeding wound in its side, chained inside a kennel meant for a dog. Rolling eyes and clamped teeth. Usually, when my creature cries like this, I am able to fall back asleep once it quiets down, but I

am thinking about Bea Calder sitting criss-cross applesauce on the rug, lulling the creature to sleep with a song. Maybe my creature is lonely without her. I wonder if it knows why the singing has stopped, if it knows that she has moved to a retirement home across town.

I creep out of bed, leaving Will behind. The wood of the floor is cold against my bare toes. I pad down the stairs to the dining room where the trapdoor is. I pull back the rug and pry open the trapdoor with ease. It is all easy movement, muscle memory. With the door fully open, the crying is much louder. I peer down at my creature, who looks back up at me with those pinprick eyes. There are no tears, the thing doesn't seem capable of making them. Its body sways back and forth, pale skin straining, as it sobs. The noise of it moves up and down like a song, breaking off and starting up again.

I have never gone down into the hole. I have never wanted to. It had always seemed too much like a grave with all that packed in dirt and darkness, but now, I am overcome with the need to get down there. I cannot sing to it. My voice is shot through, my lungs too weak, so I must find another way to console it. I go to the garage to grab the ladder. I position it inside the hole and begin to lower myself carefully down, taking one step at a time. When I land down at the very bottom, the air smells of soil and wet wood.

I turn around. My heart thumps high in my chest. I have never been this close to my creature before. It's much bigger like this. It seems just as startled as I am because it stops crying and moves clumsily away from me. Its six limbs are bent at awkward angles, the fingerless ends digging against the concrete walls and floor. Up close, it looks to have no skeleton at all, just bone shapes dumped all at once into a sack of skin, untethered to joints or tissue or cartilage. I swallow back a sense of revulsion. Its skin is unnaturally pale. The blank, featureless face moves side to side, sensing me, smelling me perhaps?

I reach out to my creature. I do not want it to be afraid of me. I would never hurt it. I have given it food and cared for it. I wanted to know why it cried, and where its hurt had come from. I touch a finger to the skin of what could be a shoulder or forearm. It jerks away, but only for a moment. It allows me to place my entire hand on its body. The skin is cold to the touch. I think of Will's skin after he has just finished a marathon. Sweat and the smell of adrenaline. There is movement underneath its skin. Ripples of movement, shaking, like everything on the inside of it wanted to come bursting out.

I wrap my arms around my creature. It must be cold down here, all alone, and I am suddenly furious with myself that I have never come down here before. The creature allows me to pull it closer. It does not nuzzle me like a dog would, like I expect it would. It simply wraps its limbs around me. I soften into its touch. I sink to my knees, press my cheek against the loose skin of its chest. I wonder if I will be absorbed into its body like the fruit I toss down to it every morning, if it will eat me up in the only way it knows how with no mouth or teeth. Maybe that has been its plan from the start. Lure me down here and suck me up. Perhaps it has absorbed others, other women who were stupid enough to climb down into a hole. Perhaps it is made of those women.

I do not know how long we stay like that, wrapped into each other, but it is long enough that I almost fall asleep. I know I must get up to bed before Will notices I am gone. So I untangle myself from the creature's limbs, slow, careful not to startle it. When I lift the ladder out of the hole and close the trapdoor, I feel like a monster. I think of a cruel little boy with unbrushed hair who studies ants under a magnifying glass and then crunches them under his sandals just to hear the sound of it.

I creep out of the dining room and jump when I see a figure standing in the hallway. But it is just Will, his back turned towards me, staring at the wall. I come up behind him and place my hand on his shoulder. He does not start, he must have heard my footsteps. He is looking at the upside-down clock, at all the paintings underneath framed in their gold frames. Tears have welled up in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" I whisper. *Have you seen me with the thing under the floor? Are you afraid of it? Of me?* My throat burns. I touch my fingertips to his chest just above his heart. I can feel it pounding. A little hummingbird heart.

"I hate this place," he says. "I'm sorry I brought us here. I'm so sorry. I thought it would be better now that I'm…" he trails off. He looks down at himself. A little boy realizing he is grown.

"You shouldn't be sorry," I say. "I like it here." My voice nearly gives out. I try a smile. "I love it here."

He looks at me like he does not recognise me. He touches his hands to my shoulders to look at me better, his touch keeping me from floating away.

"You've changed," he says. "Look at you."

I open my mouth to tell him that yes, yes, I have changed, but the transformation is a blessing. I can't imagine going back to the way things were before. My mind would no longer be full of this glorious fog. I loved my routines. I loved the bliss of nothingness. If we had never come, I never would have found my creature. Yes, my body had changed, and I could no longer take in deep breaths because of the burn in my throat. Yes, my mind had changed, and I could no longer remember things, things like how it had felt to sit at my job and speak into my microphone for other people to hear, or how it felt to hike through the woods outside, or which

kinds of foods I liked to eat. I realize then that I cannot remember if I have a favorite fruit. Did I prefer the taste of lemon or orange? What does an orange taste like? My heart pounds as I try to recall it.

"I like it here," I say to him.

Will does not look like he believes me. I can feel the rancid taste of the lie coating my throat. It makes the burn in my throat even worse.

I go to visit Will's mother, Bea Calder, in her retirement home. Like always, it is hard to leave the house behind, but I do it. I want to know what she knows about the thing under the floor. I want to know if she ever lifted the trapdoor and went down there to see it up close like I have. I want to know if she feels different now that she does not live in that place, if she misses it.

After I sign in at the front desk, a woman with large, round glasses leads me to Mrs. Calder's private room. She smiles and says she'll leave us to it. It is quiet. Slowly, I go over to the chair where Bea Calder sits, staring out the window. She has curly white hair, identical to Jackie's in every way except color. She has a pair of knitting needles and yarn in her lap, but her hands sit limp and unmoving. I have only met her once before. Will's parents had visited us in California three years ago. From the little I can recall, it had not been a very good trip. We ended up at an Italian restaurant, all silent, moving noodles around awkwardly on our plates. But Bea Calder had seemed like a nice woman. Quiet. Friendly. Now she seems much older, much more frail.

"Hello, there," I say, careful to keep my voice as level as possible.

Bea turns at the sound of my voice. Her blue eyes are filmy.

"I'm Katherine. I'm Will's wife," I continue.

Bea Calder does not move or speak. I ask her how she is doing, but she does not respond. I ask her if she has liked the retirement facility, and she does not respond. I sit on the chair beside her and gaze out the window.

"We are living in your old house," I say to her. "Do you remember it? The one up north in Bissmount?"

Nothing.

"I was wondering, Mrs. Calder, if you ever heard or saw anything strange in that house? Or if you ever thought that you and your husband weren't the only ones there?"

Mrs. Calder ignores me. Her gaze stays on the window. She watches the movement of cars outside the window. She does not even try to take in the words or form a response. I sigh and lean back in my chair. My lungs burn with exhaustion, and I resist the urge to cough. Perhaps this was a mistake, I think. I have turned into a very strange woman, indeed. Coming to bother some old woman about a monster in the ground.

"I'm sorry. I just came to see how you were doing," I say. "Will and I, we are going to come visit you more often, okay? I'm sorry we haven't really been around."

Bea brings a hand up to her face, rubs her mouth thoughtfully.

"If you don't mind, I can just sit with you for a while," I say. "Only if you'd like."

She turns to look at me. Her face seems to brighten, and though a smile does not fully form, her lips quirk just slightly.

"Okay. I'll sit with you," I say.

So I do. We sit there on green chairs, both of us looking out the huge window onto the parking lot. We watch cars pull out and leave, watch delivery trucks come right up to the front of

the building. I point out a brown dog rolling around in the grass. We sit there for a long time, unspeaking. My throat is too painful anyway for speaking. It is a relief to sit there in silence. I wonder if Bea Calder feels the same.

When an hour passes, I get up to leave. I tell Mrs. Calder that I'll be back soon, and that next time I'll bring along Will and maybe Jackie. I bend down to hug the little old woman. Her skin underneath her bright pink blouse is warm, and she smells like floral perfume. Then, she puts a hand on the back of my head and holds me there in the embrace for a moment longer than I expected. She clutches my hair, letting it fall between her fingers. Before she lets me go, she puts her lips to my ear to whisper something. The words are almost too soft for me to make out.

"Set it free," she says.

When I move away to look at her, she does not meet my gaze. She nods to herself, moves the knitting yarn around in her lap absently. I take up my purse as slowly as I can. I hope she will say something more, explain herself. But, of course, she does not, nor do I need her to. She is talking about the thing under the floor. The creature is not mine. It never was. It does not belong to me or the house or even to itself. It is an eater. It has eaten every bit of ugliness that has ever come into that house. The pain has morphed its body, stitched its mouth up. It would stay there forever, force-fed the pain of someone else, crying into the night. But I will not let that happen.

I know what I have to do. It is difficult to remember my plan once I am back inside the house—the fog—but I force myself to repeat the words over and over in my head. Set it free. Set it free. Will greets me when I arrive home. He asks me where I have been, and I do not tell him. I make up a lie about going to the post office to send a birthday card. I will tell him all of this, I

think, but I can't form the words yet. Will is ready to leave this house, and he will agree when I ask him to move after all this is over.

The house seems to know my plan. My throat is screaming, and I down four glasses of water to soothe the ache. My body is heavy. All I want to do is lie down. I think of warm, freshly cleaned sheets and pillows with feathers spilling out of the seams, a huge bed to sink into. I think of how nice it would be to forget Bea Calder's words and lay my head down to sleep. The house's dust would seep into everywhere inside me, cover the ridges of my brain down into the cracks. I keep repeating what I have to do. Set it free.

I wait until Will is asleep. That is when I pull the table back once again. Lift the rug, force the trapdoor open. I set the ladder down inside. I wonder if I will be lonely without my creature. I think of how empty the ground will feel without it there. I wonder if a new monster will simply take its place, born of new pain, but I suppose then it would not be my burden. Is this one my burden? I do not know. But it is here, right down there, and I feel as though I have made a promise.

I am afraid of living without the thing under the floor. I am afraid of leaving this house for good. But then, I think of Will. My beautiful Will, who sleeps quiet as a mouse upstairs, who does not know what I am doing right now. Will, who grew up kind, somehow, even in this house. Will, who did not know what a butterfly kiss was until I showed him. Will, who laughed, embarrassed, when I brushed my eyelashes against his cheek and then leaned in immediately, wanting another. When I step down onto the ladder, head down into the dark, I think of him. We will move out of this house. We will look for doctors who can help my lungs. He will hold me at night, tell me jokes at the breakfast table. We will fight very clumsily about unimportant things.

When I arrive at the bottom of the pit, the creature stirs from sleep. Its pinprick eyes flit about in the dim light. The same dirt smell washes over me.

“Hello, there,” I say to it. I pat the creature on its huge head.

I grasp the creature’s wide front limbs. It makes a noise from somewhere deep within. I recognize the tone of it. Confusion. Fear. So I loosen my grip, look deeply into its little eyes as if to tell it I am not going to hurt it. It is done receiving pain. I use all my strength to hoist the creature up onto my back. Its moist skin rubs on the fabric of my purple nightgown. The creature’s head comes to rest on the curve of my shoulder, a weight that is heavier than I even expected. I think of a great pale whale strapped to the back of a horse. Still, I grit my teeth, grasp the rungs of the ladder. My hands dig into the creature's skin as I hold it to my back, and I am sure it must be hurting the thing, but it does not make any sound of protest. It’s like my creature can already smell the fresh air, feel the sun on its pale skin. It knows what I am doing. I take one step up the ladder. Pain shoots through me where the creature's weight lies. Still, I do not dare let go. The ladder has twelve rungs. I take another step. Up above, beyond the opening of the trapdoor, I can hear the tick, tick, tick of the upside-down clock in the hallway, counting me down.

Behind me, the creature’s chest rises and falls. I realize for the first time that I have never seen it breathe. I did not know it took in air. I did not know it even had lungs that could inflate or collapse at all. I suppose down there, in all the dirt and earth, it did not need to breathe. I take another step. Feel another intake of breath behind me. I lift my foot. I take another step.

When the creature is free, I will begin to change again. Perhaps back into what I once was before we moved into the Calder house. Perhaps into something else entirely.

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