

An outsider writes the South

Kingston University Research

* Note: my footnotes and bibliography follow the Kingston University Information Services MHRA style of referencing for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 2015, when I started my PhD project, based on Pears and Shields, *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide*. Revised ed. (Durham: Pear Tree Books, 2008)¹. I have endeavoured to be as accurate and as true to this system which involves the proper English usage of not capitalising every word in a book title, for example. Recent MHRA advice has changed. However, I have continued with the method and style that was appropriate when I started my PhD project and for most of its research lifetime.

Novel: 49, 767 words

Thesis: 39, 862 words (excluding abstract, appendices and bibliography)

Total: 89, 629 words

¹ Kingston University Information Services, *MHRA style of referencing, faculty of Arts and Social Sciences* (2015), <<https://www.kingston.ac.uk/library-and-learning-services/>> [accessed 1 November 2015].



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Abstract

My contribution to knowledge is my original novel *Three kids and a dead dog* which illustrates how a British writer can write the American South creating a Southern Gothic novel for children/young adults without visiting the American South. I travelled and researched by text instead. Moreover, by using Bakhtin's concept of the novel's chronotope as a writing tool to enable this project, I discovered that the Southern Gothic literary landscape manifested all the elements of a Gothic house: labyrinthine extensiveness (the house or Southscape is bigger on the inside than the outside), remoteness and isolation, and haunted-ness and decay. Consequently I used each element to structure and compose my novel. The new perspective created here stems from all of the above elements combined but is realized via an intuitive collage methodology. Thus there will be strange adjacencies and messy entanglements. My thesis will be a lot less 'tidy' compared to the traditional PhD monograph.

I am responding to Faulkner and other writers in the Southern canon such as contemporary M.O. Walsh who all state, one way or another, that a writer must be a native in order to write the American South with any skill and credible authenticity. Also, although contemporary academics who work within the Southern field may not act as gatekeepers intentionally, they often assume those who write the South are from there and largely live there. This practice-based PhD project aims to create a credible Southern Gothic novel to challenge and overturn such orthodoxy.

My rigorous research and creative writing was in constant dialogue with Southern fiction writers and those such as Joan Didion and Afia Atakora, non-Southerners, who wrote the South. I was also forced into dialogue with academics who claimed the South

no longer existed in the postmodern era. Though, further significant research signposted a New New South which manifested a regional specificity and a cultural imperative to keep writing 'the South'.

Therefore I believe writers should have 'access to all areas' when acting in good faith as this enables us to tell a good story and uncover latent phenomena and even foreshadow futures of society like literary Cassandras. Osborne argues art (including literary writing) is emblematic of a category, [such as Southern Gothic] and that by including an art work in that category or canon the art may change said category or canon and even lead to a mutation.

My hybrid work may suggest that literary borders and dogmatic barriers are malleable. My text will allow other writers to cross or transgress that which was previously fortified and forbidden, at least by the likes of contemporary Southern author M.O. Walsh. So: '[...] categories are transformed, reflecting back upon their more narrowly art-historical meanings and changing them in turn' (Osborne, 20)². Thus, my conclusion is that writers do not have to 'just write what they know'. My research started as a way to fully realize my novel but soon the novel became a way to test my research (an Ouroboros?).

² Peter Osborne, 'The postconceptual condition. Or, the cultural logic of high capitalism today', *Radical Philosophy*, 184 (2014) <<https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/>> [accessed 10 September 2018], p.20.

Research questions, aims and objectives

My aim is to write a credible, well-crafted Southern Gothic novel, despite the fact I am not a native Southerner. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's chronotope theory will provide the theoretical academic basis for this project and said chronotope will be used as a tool for researching, understanding, creating and writing my Southern Gothic novel landscape, or as I reconceptualise it: the Southscape. My aim is also to tie such diverse elements together by using collage as an academic research method which will enable eccentric and creative connections and provoke new insights.

My objectives are to show that the Southern Gothic literary Southscape is composed of all the elements that constitute a literary Gothic house. My intention is not merely to assert this, but to define this, and to illustrate my thesis with relevant evidence and textual examples. I intend to outline, reflect and make explicit my writing process in order that other writers may use my methods to enhance their practice. It is also my intention to debunk the Southern literary canon orthodoxy that only born and bred Southerners can write the South. I will travel via literature and the internet rather than physically travelling to the American South. I lack the financial wherewithal to go South and the COVID-19 pandemic means such trips are proscribed anyway. If this experiment is successful, travelling without travelling, my work will stand as a good illustration for using creative constraints (such as not having the wherewithal to go South) to confect and confabulate some sort of innovation: the insights, ideas and suggested methodological process contained in my novel and my thesis.

My thesis and my novel will be my contribution to the knowledge in this field. The novel did not exist before and as far as I know, after extensive research, the

conceptualisation of the Southern Gothic literary landscape as a Gothic house is an original perspective. Writing the South as an outsider is still uncommon and discouraged because Southern writers frequently restate one needs to be from there to write there. My novel must be credible to challenge this perspective.

Thus my key research questions are can a non-Southerner write a credible Southern Gothic novel? Can Bakhtin's theory of the novel's chronotope be used as a creative composition tool? Can I show that the Southern Gothic literary landscape manifests all the elements of a Gothic house? And is it possible to achieve all this as an armchair traveller?

Three Kids and a Dead Dog

By Elisa Marcella Webb (k1534315)

Short novel for Practice-based Southern Gothic Imaginative Writing PhD (KSA 2022)

‘Most of the great flame-throwers were there and naturally, handling Big John de Conquer and his works. How he had done everything big on earth, then went up tuh heben without dying atall. Went up there picking a guitar and got all de angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne...’

Their eyes were watching God, Zora Neale Hurston

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Dumped by the side of the highway

They were dumped by the side of the highway. The blacktop gave off a volcanic heat. Waker wanted to jump down into the drainage ditch, running alongside of the road. But there'd be snakes in the shade. And God knows what else: rusty beer cans, broken co-cola bottles and road kill. But she couldn't stop thinking about the muddy storm water still deep at the bottom. She imagined it seeping into her sneakers, squelchy and cold. Even if she sank up to her neck she wouldn't mind because she'd be cold. She'd shiver and float like an old leaf. Obsessive thoughts of the cold and old leaves reminded her of the London she'd left behind. But that felt like a hundred years ago. Too much had happened. And it had happened to her.

A truck appeared. Its thick tyres blurred in the rippling heat. It slowed but didn't stop. Three cutdown kids and two muddy dogs weren't worth breaking for. Halo muttered to herself, cursing the no'count driver. Theo shrugged. Merlyn and Dealer barked. Waker turned her greasy baseball cap around so it shaded her neck. But the sun burned her eyes. So she twisted it back. She was too tired to hate the sun anymore. It had won. It beat down scalding her skin and scorching up the remains of the big storm. Mosquitoes whirred around her face.

She ignored the next truck, still ruminating on finding a cold place. But it rolled to a stop. An elderly man leaned out, chuckling. His hands gnarled and dark, patted the door.

Well what y'all doing alongside dis road?

They stopped what they'd been doing which was nothing very much, since their last ride had set them down in the middle of the endless Empty. They'd watched the battered

car do a U-turn and head back in the direction they'd come. The family it seemed had forgotten something important; possibly nappies, their sticky one-armed baby smelt of urine. Waker wrinkled her nose, she could still smell it. However, she was too hot and tired to wonder how the child had lost its arm. They'd just been hanging on for another ride. And none of them had an answer and none of them had a plan that was going to take them very far away from their recent crime.

Suh? said Theo, playing for time.

Y'all need a ride? His eyes crinkled at their grubby T-shirts and stained jeans.

Yessuh, Theo answered. Halo and Waker nodded. For some reason Waker felt she should keep quiet. They didn't want to stand out any more than they had too. At this moment they were just kids needing a ride, maybe on a camping trip gone wrong. An English accent may be remarked on and questions asked. Questions they couldn't answer. They needed time to get their story straight.

Well hop on back, he jerked his thumb. Hold up...

They froze worried the man had changed his mind but he thrust a box of *Eggos* out the cab window.

Thank you, muttered Halo. Waker followed Theo. She wasn't sure how you got up into the back of a flatbed but this was way better than any old London bus. *If* they ever got back she was definitely going to put on her dad's old *Cool as Fuck* T-shirt. She'd earned it after all. And that would help her come up with a plan. She was good at plans but she needed a pen and paper to get a grip on stuff. Sliding a blue biro over a new wide lined note pad calmed her down and she needed to calm down. Her legs were still shaking.

Theo unhooked the tailgate. He whistled for the dogs. Merlyn and Dealer had spent their hanging about time sniffing and barking at the dank water. Merlyn's black pelt was coated in congealed grease and river mud. Dealer bounced about as if he was trying to let them know, in his dog like way, that he was on guard and they'd be alright. But Dealer hadn't killed anyone. So he was entitled to his opinion; his dog's eye view. True, Clay had needed killing. Nevertheless it had all put a crimp in Waker's summer and *if* they were caught, her life. Waker wondered: did they look different now? This old timer probably couldn't see too well but if he could, what would he see? Waker felt different, strange. Sick. Dirty on the outside and the inside. She needed to get back to the trailer to write it all down and out of her head. Maybe then it would go away?

Waker and Halo dragged themselves aboard. The flatbed was hot and dusty. But Hell it wasn't the blacktop. When they were settled the old man slowly re-joined the highway. They tore into the dry fluffy waffles, sharing two with the dogs. Merlyn leaned over the side, her tongue loose, cooling with the breeze. Dealer settled next to Theo. Waker's grubby hair whipped into her face. It stuck to her sweaty cheeks and caught in her teeth. She yanked it away, slipped off her baseball cap and lent her head back over the side of the truck. Let the wind cool her whole damn head. Maybe the rotten river smell would be blown away?

Halo caught the toe of Waker's sneaker.

Gal bess not be doin that.

Waker pulled her head in to hear what Halo had to say.

Lass person don that, lost they head.

Theo snorted.

Uh huh, continued Halo, gearing up for a Halo story.

It was night. No, it was day-clean. Halo recalibrated while they imagined a misty dawn with something awful about to happen. They bin drinking, thought they'd play the dog. Leanin out the window when a redneck truck come outta nowhere. Sliced 'em clean in two. Right...

Halo looked around and rubbed her face with her arm. Right over there, she nodded her head towards the deserted interstate beyond the cotton fields.

Did not, Theo laughed.

Did too. State troopers still looking for their other half, to this very day.

Theo considered and looked around. He pushed Dealer aside for more room.

Maybe there be some kinda reward? he said.

Maybe, said Halo leaning back and letting the breeze buffet her bouncy hair.

Waker was on the outside again. By rednecks Halo meant white people, stupid white people. Just when she thought she was fitting in, learning American and earning the right to wear her dad's old T-shirt. She lost it. Maybe Waker didn't know anything worth knowing like how to ride in the back of a flatbed, or how to cover up a murder. She hoped she got the chance to take Halo on the Northern line one day, at rush hour. Then she'd be in charge. And she'd read a shit load of books so maybe *if* she could just think, she'd be useful after all? But she couldn't think. She rubbed her red neck.

Since Clay's death she'd been moving in slow motion. They all had. It was like her brain was full of glue. She'd done so much thinking and so fast. It was like she'd burned out her brain. She didn't even know if the old timer was driving them in the right direction.

What if he was some crazy man kidnapper? She looked at Merlyn. Could she protect them now Pearl was gone?

Halo was watching her. Waker put her cap back on to hide her eyes from Halo's she she talk.

How much? Waker asked. She needed to escape the swirling watery nightmare that was roiling inside her head.

Huh?

How much would the reward be? Her English accent was still sharp, spikey against Halo's sleepy drawl.

Halo shrugged, *Re-ward* be small coz it only half a body.

But could be..., Theo widened his hands to make his case. You got grieving kin and they caint bury half a body so they'd have tuh wait.

Half a body in the morgue freezer, *and* the coroner charging a surcharge, added Waker.

Theo and Halo looked at her. Waker wasn't exactly sure what a surcharge was. And she wanted to forget about death because that thinking took her right back to Doll Island. But she continued. The talking got her out of her head.

Well if you got one corpse, even half a corpse taking up space. You can't fit in any new ones. They all gazed out across the cotton fields trying not to catch one another's eyes.

Halo nodded chewing this wisdom over. Merlyn settled down next to Theo.

Waker could tell they were impressed. And they all wanted to lose themselves in this tall tale. Half a fake corpse was miles better than a whole real one.

The driver wrapped the glass. They all jumped.

How far you kids fixin to go?

All the way to Hell, snickered Halo.

All the way to the morgue, added Waker. Halo frowned.

Piggly Wiggly, exit 9, shouted Theo.

The man nodded. Dealer barked.

Georgia

The highway was where this whole mess had started. Although, Waker's mom had tried to sell it to her as a holiday or 'vacation'.

You'll love it, remember that girl in your class went to Florida. She came back with... her mom looked around Waker's tiny neat room looking for an answer.

Herpes? Waker muttered. The girl hadn't brought anything back for Waker.

Waker's mom frowned.

You really need to get out of this room and away from that dictionary.

Waker had been reading an old school dictionary as all her other books had been ruined by the drunk upstairs. He'd been on a bender with Waker's mom, and forgot to pull the plug out of the bath. He'd been trying to fill it with cold water to cool his beer as the landlord had refused to replace his busted fridge. Waker knew all about this because the old git had been screaming about it for three days. Not the best advert for homebrew. Waker dreamt about a flood pouring down through her ceiling with brown bottles floating like boats caught in a tidal wave. She couldn't now remember if that had actually happened. But she'd woken up drenched with shards of plaster prickling her face.

Long story short they were leaving to go on holiday or a 'vacation', as Waker's mom insisted on calling it, hoping that the flat (and everything else) would be fixed on their return. Waker's mom had got good at not drinking in their flat but having a free bar upstairs was just too much on a bad day. And there had been too many bad days recently for them both. Waker had curled up with her books and notepads trying to ignore the bumps and thumps upstairs but now all that was ruined. She'd been planning an

ultimatum, making some demands of her own. However, she needed a pen and paper to clarify what her teacher called her 'issues'. She'd even set up a running-away-rucksack in case her mom didn't listen. But now they were both running away. Together? Light out for America.

Waker and her mom both traded English for American when it suited them. They had this in common. Though, it annoyed Waker when other people pointed it out. At school it was the only thing that made her cool. She added some embellishments: making up new words, inventing places and even explaining away her cheap blocky trainers as anti-gator sneakers. These, she explained to the whole class, would protect your feet in the terrible event of a gator attack and even repel snake bites. The teacher wrote all this down and asked if she should buy some for her 'grown-up gap year' in Thailand. Waker agreed this was a good idea. Though, any fool could see they weren't any good for running away. Her ditzy teacher was bound to come to a bad end.

The holiday/vacation was like a full stop. Waker's mom had been vague about how long they'd be there. It depended on boring stuff, like the flat, the landlord and money. Waker felt like she was trapped in one of the beer bottles, swept down a whirlpool to who knew where. She couldn't see what was next and she didn't like it one bit. Would her mom decide to stay in America? Hell, it wasn't even Florida. It was some old family house in the back of beyond. Even Google failed to come up with any Intel.

But the fat plane bounced onto the runway. And they were there. One. Two. Three. Down. Waker counted before being sick for the fourth time. Peanuts and Diet coke coated her jeans and splattered her T-shirt. Another failed travel sickness remedy. However, she was more worried about being dumped on her redneck relatives than being sick.

America, The United States of America, well one state: Georgia. JOUR-JAH. Waker repeated its name. Georgia. It filled her rancid mouth like a giant toffee. Waker couldn't believe she was actually *in* America. She was excited and sceptical at the same time. Perhaps there was a special word for that? Scepta-cited? She made a mental note to write it down now she'd stocked up on pens and paper at the airport. Her mom wasn't happy about the expense but she was feeling too guilty to say no. Waker thought she had about 24 hours before her mom forgot about feeling guilty and stopped spending money. Waker wanted some highlighters and some multi-coloured *Sharpies*. So she planned to keep an eye out when they crossed Duty Free in America.

Sure she'd been before but she couldn't remember it. There'd been a boy and a big dog. However, the house was clear because of her mom's photo album. It felt like a memory. She knew the long porch, the tall door and the chandeliers circling *all* the downstairs rooms. Waker didn't share this at school because there'd been slaves back in the day. Her great, great, (Waker wasn't sure how many greats there were) Grampa Ogelthorpe had married a freed slave. This hadn't gone down too well locally but he was rich enough to get away with anything. Or so went the family legend. Waker and her mom were their descendants. Not the descendants of the *other* Ogelthorpes her mom always added. Waker could never find out what the other Ogelthorpes had done that was so awful. What could be worse than owning people? She tried not to think about this fact when she imagined the big house, the horses, the pools, the beach trips and there'd be skiing in the winter. She'd never been and she wasn't sure they could ski in Georgia. Maybe they'd go north to Canada for that. She planned to snowboard as that looked easier than skiing and way more cool.

At Savannah airport there was only a coffee shop selling giant pretzels. Her mom stopped to buy two with a green ten dollar bill. Waker began to chew straight away. It had a brown taste, like varnish. Being sick always made her hungry. Her eyes were dry and scratchy. Her T-shirt was stiff with vomit.

Waker's mom was irritable after the long flight. Waker could tell she was disappointed with herself. She'd promised not to drink on the flight. She'd only had four vodkas. Though, this was partly because they were very expensive *and* the steward had raised his tweezered eyebrows at Vodkas three and four. He'd looked pointedly at Waker, silently suggesting her mom should know better. Waker's mom did know better and she didn't need some jumped-up-trolley-dolly telling her. Least she wasn't a drunk like the man upstairs. Waker had tried to help by giving up books for a week just to understand what it was like to give up something that kept you going. She'd lasted two days. She couldn't go any longer with nothing between her and the bullies at school or the traffic on the main road. Books were her blanket and her escape. Waker had to binge read *Harry Potter* just to feel right again.

Waker's mom strode ahead yanking her suitcase towards a restroom sign. Waker trotted after her trying to keep up but her wheeled case kept tipping, twisting her arm. In the restroom Waker's mom leaned on the sink, her lank hair hiding her sallow face.

Are you feeling sick? Waker asked.

No, just tired, change your T-shirt, snapped her mom.

OKAY MOM, Waker muttered, pulling out her American vocabulary, but sounding too English. Waker felt like some sort of hybrid who didn't fit in either place: like high-

heeled trainers or a Pizzly. This feeling had increased when Waker was ten and found out she'd been a twin but her sister was still born. Maybe if her sister had lived one of them could have been the English one and the other American? Sometimes Waker resented her sister for letting her down and leaving her alone but mostly she was just another old story. She didn't even have a real name to seal her soul. Waker's mom only mentioned her once and called her Abiku or rather she said she was an abiku. This wasn't in Waker's dictionary but she found it on the internet: abiku, a Yoruba word for a child destined to die before puberty. But, and this was the creepy part, the abiku is somehow destined to be reborn again and again unless it was stopped. Maybe this was why Waker's mom hadn't gone for any more children? Or maybe the abiku had popped up next door? Mrs Atakora did have a very ugly little boy. And Mrs Randall was so big she must be having triplets. Sometimes late at night when Waker was too tired to read anymore she thought there was something hovering just at the edge of her bed. When she moved her eyes there was nothing there but if she didn't move her eyes there was a shadow, a shade. The abiku?

Waker's mom eyed her in the mirror. Don't, just don't... she trailed off, too beaten to finish her sentence.

Waker pretended not to notice. They didn't get on and this wasn't going to change any time soon, what with them going their separate ways. Least that's how Waker saw it. They were on a break. Sure Waker's mom had tried to sell it like an extra-long, EXPENSIVE vacation where Waker would get to know her cousin, except he wasn't her cousin. Theo was actually her uncle but they were both 11. What sort of weird shit was that? Waker's mom was off to spend the summer at some sort of retreat where they made pots and chanted at seagulls. Nana-North-London (Nana-North for short) called it rehab. Waker

thought this might be true but why go all the way to America? Sure there'd be free childcare for Waker, and maybe the dead ones couldn't follow them across the ocean? But most likely there was a guy.

Waker unzipped her case, grabbed the first T-shirt she saw and went into the stall. It was purple with mother-of-pearl buttons up and down the sleeves. She hated it. It had been a present from Nana-North, part of her ongoing campaign to civilise her daughter-in-law and scruffy granddaughter. Just wear it in bed or when Nana-North bothers to come around, said Waker's mom. Nana-North usually brought much needed cash.

Waker hurried banging her elbow. She tore off the grubby T-shirt, and dropped it on the icky floor. There were messages scrawled on the back of the door. Waker sat down and read them: *The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous MATTHEW and when the dead rise, they will be like the angels in heaven MARK and **not really now not any more.*** Creepy, Waker decided not to hang around. When she came out her mom was rinsing her face again and again in cold water. It looked like she'd been crying.

That is an awful T-shirt, she said. Try not to be sick in the cab.

Waker didn't fancy the rest of her pretzel after they'd taken them into the restroom. She dumped it in a bin at the airport exit. A wave of warm air wrapped itself around them, embalming them. The morning sun was bright after their night flight. Green patches of grass were being watered by sprinklers; circling three tall empty plinths. Monuments to nothing. Thick Cedars lined up next to a large billboard of a giant leering face: Clay DuCane, Realtor. Waker's mom scanned the cabs. Most of the other passengers from their flight had already slipped away. A driver got out of his car.

Welcome to Savannah, Ma'am, he said moving towards them, his large hands taking over their cases.

As he bent to his task, Waker's mom shouted out: Clay?

The cabbie straightened up. Ma'am?

But before Waker's mom had chance to explain a tall man stepped between them. He pushed some bills into the cabbie's hand then turned and grinned at them both. He was so good looking he looked weird, thought Waker. And he was the man in the advert. The cabbie retreated shaking his head.

Clay jerked his thumb towards the giant billboard face. As if to say I know but what can you do?

He stuck his hand out for Waker to shake.

Clay Ogelthorpe DuCane, and you must be *Waker*?

Waker nodded. She'd given him her left hand as she couldn't remember how to shake properly. Her hands were sticky with pretzel. Clay didn't seem to notice. She expected him to shake her mom's hand. But he put his arms around her and pulled her close, kissing her forehead so firmly it pushed her head back. She looked like a rag doll. Waker raised her eyebrows. So there was a guy. Clay looked at her mom. Waker's mom looked back. It was like watching two actors play a cheesy airport reunion.

Then Clay wheeled around and said a little too loud: let's get you gals home.

He bent over their cases. His thick sandy hair fell over his eyes. He smelt of something expensive. His car was air-conditioned cold. It had a fake smell like lemon loo cleaner. Waker's mom gave her a sharp look to remind her not to be sick again, ever. Waker tried to make herself comfortable on the smooth leather seat while her mom and Clay stowed

their luggage. Clay said something and her mom laughed. They got into the front. Clay made a show of turning around to remind Waker to 'buckle up little lady'. Waker expected some talk, the sort that adults directed at children while not listening for answers. But Clay didn't bother. He turned towards the wheel driving smoothly onto the interstate.

The road was quiet. The sun shone. Waker squinted through the car's tinted glass, at the endless highway: a straight blacktop with no bends, no curves, no towns; just signs and extra-wide cars. She expected something different, like America on TV: big houses with kids shooting basketball on green front lawns with pool parties out back. At school there was an old book with pictures of American diners shaped like doughnuts and oranges. *Where were they?* Waker wanted to find an Oreo diner. She pictured herself standing in front. But it was still early. Perhaps it would change later on?

Waker's mom was asleep. Waker hoped she wouldn't snore or drool, that'd be gross. Things were bad enough since her dad's heart stopped and her mom melted into vodka. They passed wooden houses: some with shutters and shopping malls with huge empty parking lots. Then brown trees enclosed the highway. Trailers and houses that looked like trailers appeared and disappeared in the woods. Sometimes there were cars and trucks parked by the houses, sometimes rusty swings and barbeques. There were no people about. But there were more billboards and handmade signs: **THE MESSAGE SPOKEN THROUGH ANGELS IS BINDING, EVERY VIOLATION AND DISOBEDIENCE WILL BE PUNISHED HEBREWS** and *The four angels are ready for this very hour and day and month and year will be released to kill a third of mankind* REVELATIONS. Waker shivered, more weird shit. She dragged her sweatshirt out of her rucksack and pulled it over her head. It smelt of London: spilt beer and fags.

Waker dozed off. She woke up to hear her mom and Clay talking. They seemed to be talking about back in the day, before Waker's mom was even a mom. Clay was working hard, laughing at her mom's comments. He offered her mom a list of names, characters from high school now indicted or birthing conjoined twins. Waker wanted to hear more so she pretended she was still asleep.

No, Clay that can't be...

Yep, saw her pushing a *special* stroller in Atlanta, she even paid for some *special* tests, lookin to for someone to blame, someone to sue.

Waker's mom snorted with laughter. Waker wondered since when did her mom snort with laughter?

We'll stop in about a mile, get the kid some cider.

Waker's mom nodded and looked out of her window.

Waker was cold and her neck was stiff. Clay pulled off the highway. Cars the size of mini-buses passed them. Gravel crunched under the wheels as he slowed to a stop in the shadow of some pine trees.

Comfort break, he smirked, looking at Waker in the mirror.

They got out. Waker rubbed her chin on the sleeve of her sweatshirt. Clay headed towards a rickety wooden shed with *Bubba Joe's Cider Stand* painted on the side. They followed. Waker's legs ached but it felt good to be out in the warm air. Behind the counter, a lean boy pushed a phone into his pocket, nodded and sauntered over to serve them. A severed plastic hand dangled from his leather necklace.

Three ciders? said Clay looking at them for confirmation. And some potato chips? He added, sounding like it was a clever idea. They nodded. Though, Waker and her mom had

agreed ages ago that Britain made the best crisps in the world, after trying greasy foreign offerings. Waker had decided she wouldn't even bother to eat crisps/potato chips in America. She'd just wait until she got back home. Her stand was short lived.

Look, let me pay, said Waker's mom, bustling forward with her big bag.

Clay held up his leather wallet and waved her away. He looked cross.

You not in London now missy, he said. We got different ways, actin like you don't know how to behave.

Waker's mom's face crumpled. Clay, I'm... she stopped and bit her lip.

Waker expected Clay to apologise but instead he marched off towards the trees. Waker wanted to ask her mom what just happened. Her mom thrashed about in her bag for a used tissue.

Are you crying?

No, NO, said her mom. I'm tired is all and Clay... they both watched him. He was kicking the gravel. He looked like a little boy. Waker almost felt sorry for him. The lad at the cider stand pretended not to notice, his eyes glued to his phone. Waker was annoyed she'd asked her mom such a stupid question. Her mom was crying and it was all Clay's fault. Waker's mom went up to Clay and spoke to him. Clay caught her mom's arm and pulled her away towards the edge of the road. Now the lad at the stand was watching. He looked worried. Waker tried to ignore him. She didn't know what to do. Clay now held both her mom's arms in front of him. Her mom continued to talk until Clay dropped her arms and they walked back. Waker's mom rubbed her wrists.

They took the drinks over to a picnic table beside the highway, as if nothing odd had happened. It all felt unreal, like a weird dream. Waker picked up the potato chips: *Salt and*

Vinegar. Could be worse. She watched a truck drive past. The driver waved. Waker scowled and turned towards the cider. Was she even awake? Her body felt like it was still on the plane.

It's not real cider, just apple juice, said her mom, pulling her long legs over the picnic bench and sitting down. Waker took a swig. It was sweet with a bitter after taste, like apples gone bad.

Clay took a long relaxed swig of his cider.

That sure feels good, he said. He spoke slowly like he had all day. He was watching her mom. She blushed and rooted around in her bag for some fags. She put the squashed packet on the table next to her cider cup. Clay covered her mom's hand briefly. Waker's mom pulled it back and began searching for her lighter.

Those'll kill ya, said Clay.

Waker's mom shrugged.

Waker looked at her cider. Clay was right. What was her mom thinking? Bad enough she'd already lost one parent. Waker's mom opened her mouth as if she was about to explain the benefits of smoking but didn't have energy to follow through.

Better than another vodka, Waker thought, opening her crisps. She took out the biggest crisp she could find. It was a long tongue shape with salt crystals dotting the edges. It tasted of cooking oil and salt but not vinegar.

Clay opened his crisps and ate one. He watched Waker's mom. He had the same wide set Ogelthorpe eyes; he could almost be her mom's brother. Waker shuddered, what a creep. Maybe they'd get lucky and he'd choke to death on his crisps. Waker imagined the headlines: local realtor and big head Clay Ogelthorpe etc. etc. killed by potato chip. Waker

shuddered. Waker's mom didn't open her crisps. Waker could tell she wanted to get back on the road. And she needed a drink. The morning sun warmed Waker's back. The pines souged above them.

Restroom's out back, these little places want you to buy somethin' first... to use the facilities. Clay laughed and shook his head. The sun caught his thick hair. He looked like he was advertising expensive shampoo. Waker finished her crisps. The salt felt good in her mouth. It took her queasiness away. Finishing the cider brought it back again.

How's your wife? asked Waker's mom.

This surprised Waker. The way Clay was acting she'd thought he was single, and on the hunt. Clay looked surprised too, hurt even. He sighed, and leaned back placing both his hands on the table, bracing for impact.

Well, he drew out the word. She's mostly busy in Atlanta building the best black legal business south of the Mason Dixon Line. Been so busy she don't even have the time for a *di-vorce*. He laughed. And boy am I sure glad about *that*. You know what's worse than being married to a lawyer? He looked at them both and smiled his giant billboard grin. Being *di-vorced* by one.

Waker's mom laughed and stubbed out her cigarette. Waker thought he'd used this line before. He ran his hand through his thick hair and pulled a sad face; like a man yet to discover a life changing shampoo.

Now don't get me wrong she's one helluva lawyer. *Gal*, he corrected himself, but you drift and then... well here y'all are.

It was Waker's mom's turn to place her hand on Clay's. Something had been settled. Waker didn't bother to look sympathetic; her face was tired after the long flight. And she had plenty of shampoo.

Clay nodded at Waker: but got me a great little doll-baby, 'bout your age. He glanced off towards the car. Course she favours her mom some... Waker thought this might be a cue to join the conversation but doll-baby sounded like she was some sort of toddler or maybe she was slow?

Clay? said Waker's mom.

Clay turned towards her mom. You know I'd never... He looked sad. Waker started to feel sorry for him. He drummed his hands on the table and stood up.

Time to roll, he said.

Waker hurried to the restroom. Trees crowded up to the hut. Waker peered into the brown undergrowth. Despite the shade it was getting very warm. She could hear flies buzzing, a generator throbbed, the smell of diesel filled the air. Then she noticed she was being watched by a deer. Its big eyes stared at her, considering, before it darted away into the gloom.

Back in the car, Waker's mom thrust a cold coke at her with shaking hands.

This'll settle your stomach, she said.

Waker opened it slowly. The brown fizz bubbled up over the aluminium. Waker loved the bubbles more than the drink. She sucked them off the tin top. She took some gulps but was disappointed. It was supposed to taste of caramel and vanilla, but as usual it tasted of aluminium and cheap sugar. Her nose stung.

The expensive car was so smooth on the road; it felt like the landscape was moving not them. Waker and her mom stared at the monotonous pines. Her mom pointed out a brown thrasher. This turned out to be a boring bird. Trees and more trees. Maybe the whole State was one giant forest peppered with bible warnings.

Waker drank her coke. She didn't know what else to do. Then she needed the loo again. She shifted under the seat belt trying to make her bladder forget. A green sign announced places Waker had never heard of: Saint Simons Islands, Waycross, Moultrie, Cairo, *Cairo*? Then the Noonday river... followed by two signs for a State Asylum and a Human Anatomical Sciences Laboratory/HASL. More creepy shit.

Thas shut, said Clay, settling in for a story. Waker was bored stupid but she didn't want to listen to a story that would have her sleeping with the light on for weeks, especially out here. The words: not really now ... not any more, floated back into her mind.

However, Waker's mom leaned forward telling Clay to take a left at the next crossroads. He frowned in the mirror but slowed down and signalled left. A truck with a peeling stars and bars sticker on the back window overtook. The new road was punctuated by occasional meadows with two or three horses standing about sweating and swishing their tails against flies.

You sho y'all wanna see the old place? I can put you ladies up in town, got a house on the market not selling for love *nor* money. Got a pool and it's near Angel Ice Cream. He winked at Waker in the rear-view mirror. Waker's mom ignored Clay and leaned forward. She was holding a piece of paper. Typical, thought Waker our family doesn't even live on a proper map.

Another right and then the first left, it's the track.

Darlin I know the way, snapped Clay. It sounded like he needed a drink too.

Fork in the Road

They came to a fork in the road. Literally, a big faded sign of a giant fork advertising *Ogelthorpe's Finest Steak and Shrimp*. Waker shuddered at the idea of eating shrimps. Pink scaly things with a weird scented taste like a seaside air freshener.

There was no other traffic so Clay rolled to a stop in the middle of the road. To the left the road continued up towards the sun. To the right the road plunged down into thick shade. There was no direction sign, even on the restaurant billboard. It was as if you had to know your way around already, or go back to the highway. Leave.

Jeez, that restaurant closed years ago. You'd think someone'd take the sign down, said Waker's mom.

Steak and Shrimp? Clay turned the name over in his mouth. Uh huh. Hit the TV news, while back. He scowled at the big faded fork. Steak and Shrimp Slaying. Owner chastised his wife, then the po-lice shot him off the roof. Geechees. He shook his head as if that explained it. Waker wanted to hear more about this but her mom just shrugged.

Home Sweet Home. We're on the right road, anyway, she said.

Clay slowly took the darker turn. Trees scraped along the roof, like something was trying to get into the car. Waker was glad the windows were shut. In some places the branches wacked the windshield. Waker's mom appeared oblivious. Waker slid further down in her seat glaring at the dry pine boughs. Some trees were covered in ivy shaped leaves, spikey round missiles dangling from the ends.

Sweet gum, muttered her mom.

Waker shivered. They passed under heart shaped leaves thick with engorged caterpillars. Then the road just stopped. There was a line up ahead where the asphalt came to an abrupt end, as if someone had given up on a drawing and left. After that there was a red dirt track. The trees were different here. They had smooth flat leaves that fanned out with white flowers, piled on top.

Mountain Laurel, said Waker's mom.

Waker scanned the leaves for more bugs. She bet the caterpillars were poisonous. She was glad she had on long sleeves. But she needed a plan to get them back on the plane to London. Maybe she could fake appendicitis?

We almost called you that. Mountain Laurel, continued Waker's mom.

Say what? said Waker, leaning forward and holding her stomach.

Well we'd just use Laurel when calling you. She replied using her tone that meant Waker was an idiot.

Waker frowned and looked at her mom. She was so thin now. But in her jeans and black T-shirt she could pass for normal. Then she'd say something like that, as if it was okay. It'd been hard enough at school being called Waker Waker. Waker always had to train new teachers just to say her name once. Most people (or normal people) didn't get it at all. In the Ogelthorpe family they were all named twice. Her uncle Theo and her Grampa Theo who still lived here, in the back of beyond, were called Theodore Theodore. Her mom was Olivia Olivia etc. etc. Every year some busybody from the school office would bustle in to double check the register. And *Mountain Mountain?* Jeez, her mom wasn't only mad she was crazy. Waker began to ruminate on other weird southern words like Catalpa and Hoecake... Hoecake Hoecake she bet Clay would've favoured that one.

The track was bumpy. The car bounced up and down. Waker began to feel queasy. So she shelved the appendicitis plan for the time being. Before she could decide what to do (tell her mom and risk a telling off) or open the window and risk losing an eye), the trees thinned revealing flat fields on either side of the road. There were no horses but at least it would be safe to open a window. Beyond the fields there were even more trees, hemming them in. Waker was sick of trees. A rusting farm gate barred the track.

Waker, you can open the gate, like you did on holiday? Waker's mom was mellow drunk but it wouldn't last. Her mom smiled, like she was giving out treats. Waker remembered the *holiday* she'd spent with her parents in a cold cottage at the end of a one-shop village. Opening gates and listening to her parents' fight had been the only holiday activities on offer apart from long walks in the drizzling rain. Waker shuddered. She blamed holidays for a lot of things.

Waker's mom poked her in the ribs. The car had stopped. Clay wound down his window. Waker got out leaving her car door open. It was like stepping into an oven. There was no breeze. Waker looked around.

Watch out for snakes, Clay laughed, adding, little lady.

Waker ground her teeth, *that* was getting old.

She appeared to be the only thing alive. She could see no horses, no deer, no birds. Just long dry grass and the tree line. She kept to the track. It looked like snake country. That's what her dad had called it.

If the Cottonmouths don't get you, the Diamondbacks will, he'd said.

He'd called her mom's family dirt-eating-rednecks when he was in a good mood, trailer trash after a row. She missed the insults. They were mostly what she remembered

about him. The gate was chained and padlocked. Waker rattled at the hot metal but unless she found a key she couldn't open it. Her mom got out of the car and stood with her shaking hands shielding her eyes.

It doesn't matter, we can get out here, she called.

Both Waker and Clay looked at her like she was cracked.

It's not far, now. We'll leave our cases here. Dad can pick them up later. *Your Grampa Theo*, she added for Waker's benefit.

It sounded like she was trying to reassure herself. Clay shrugged.

Why don't I take y'all into town? Drop you off someplace for a drink.... Meet the old man there?

Waker liked this plan better. She was bored of the empty country and worried about snakes. She needed a loo and she missed her dad.

No it's fine, snapped her mom, as if that was enough to reassure them.

Couldn't we have lunch and then come back? said Waker. Like never.

But Waker's mom was already pulling her bag off the back seat. By the time their cases, rucksacks and jackets were piled by the gate, they were all slick with sweat. Clay rubbed his face.

Don't feel quite right leaving you here in *The Empty*.

It's fine, it's just around the bend, replied her mom.

Got that right, muttered Waker, shouldering her rucksack.

And what the hell was *The Empty*?

But Clay wasn't so worried about leaving them that it stopped him. He reversed down the track, until he could swing the car around. He didn't even bother to wave or

honk the horn. Waker watched it disappear into the trees. Her dad wouldn't have done that she thought, twisting her T-shirt. It was very quiet. The only sound was Waker's mom glugging from their warm water bottle. She offered it to Waker. Waker shook her head, slid off her rucksack and darted behind some spikey bushes.

Watch out for snakes, called her mom.

Waker was so desperate to piss she didn't care. Pulling up her jeans she stared at the track ahead. It reminded her of a tatty school poster: a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. No mention of pissing in the bushes first.

It's really not that far, said her mom, sounding unconvinced.

Waker was annoyed. Why hadn't Clay stayed if he thought it was dodgy?

Waker's mom rummaged around in her rucksack pulling out some congealed green sun-screen. She squeezed out the last dollop and offered it to Waker. Waker smeared on as little as possible. She didn't want to meet her Uncle Theo looking like a rotting corpse. Then she pulled on her baseball cap and rubbed the leftover cream on the back of her neck. Her mom reached out to help but Waker shook her off. Her mom looked sad.

Shall I do your arms? she said.

There's not enough. Why don't we just get there and out of the sun?

Waker clambered over the gate. Her mom followed. There was a clinking sound above their heads. Waker looked up. Bottles dangled from tree branches with small bones tapping against them. Her mom stopped and leaned back.

Wow, old school Hoodoo. Bottle *and* bone tree. I wonder who's working it out here?

But Waker didn't want any wondering. She'd heard of Hoodoo before but she'd hadn't believed it was a real, just another tall tale. Something about root medicines and stealing your footprints, kind of Halloween but for poor people.

They squinted up into the canopy. There were old whiskey bottles and brown beer bottles. Waker wasn't surprised. Diligent drinking, it took years of application to amass that many bottles. Some of the bottles were small and green like old time medicine bottles.

They're only chicken bones, said her mom. Waker wasn't so sure; some of the bones looked too big to be chicken.

Well that's okay then, said Waker. No need to worry. At least there's no psycho sign saying Keep Out.

Her mom ignored the sarcasm. They started along the track. The bottles tinkled behind them in the ghost of a breeze. Waker wished they were back in the cold car. The sun beat down. The red dirt baked hard beneath their feet. Waker felt her arms begin to burn. They could hear a saw scream in the distance, a dog barked.

Great, snakes *and* dogs, said Waker.

She was nervous around dogs. In London she saw them in the distance at the edge of the park. She didn't like barking or their dagger teeth. They walked in silence. The fierce sun made Waker hot and cross. She stamped along with her eyes down. Sweat ran down the side of her face. She ruminated on her mom's tall-tales of playing in the river to keep cool. Where was that? And wouldn't there be alligators? She didn't notice the Mountain Laurel trees closing in around them until her arms began to feel the shade. She stopped. She scratched her itchy elbows. Her mom stopped too. There was a faint lemony smell.

I used to love this path. I was worried the trees might have gone.

Gone where? Waker wondered. Something moved in the trees. Waker peered into the dense leaves expecting to see another deer. Instead, she saw a face. But before Waker was sure it was gone.

Who was that? said Waker.

Who was what?

Someone, something *in there*, Waker pointed towards the dark shiny leaves.

I didn't see anyone, probably just a deer... or haints? We're near Ogelthorpe graves. I'll show you. Her mom shucked off her rucksack and pushed her way into the trees. Waker was left alone. She couldn't even hear the dog now. It was very very quiet. It felt like the heat was solid, pressing all the life out of the land. Her mom reappeared out of breath.

They must be further down; she said pulling some cobwebby leaves from her hair. This is a longer walk than I remember. Maybe you were right, feels like we are being watched.

Waker wished her mom hadn't said that. She wished again they'd never left London.

Hoodoo

Waker noticed strands of frayed black ribbon looped around some of the branches.

What's the ribbon for?

Her mom shrugged. Hoodoo.

Hoodoo? muttered Waker, of course. Why didn't I think of that? Jeez. She rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans. At least there were no dangling bones. The saw started again.

Your Grampa's working.

The laurel trees thinned out. Flat baked fields fanned out around them. Waves of heat distorted the horizon. And there was something else to see: Coeur D'Alene.

The old house loomed and leaned like something left over from an abandoned funfair. To Waker it had always been a sort of fairy tale castle, stuffed with gems and magical animals. And anything else she wanted and didn't have. Her mom had a biscuit tin under her bed filled with dog eared family photos. Waker would pull them out when she'd read all her library books and make up stories about them. There was a blurry photo of 20 people arranged on a porch leaning or sitting against five white columns. The photo was so old everything looked kinda brown including the Ogelthorpes. Waker would stare at this picture to see if some of the faces became clearer. But it never happened. And she was desperate to catch sight of the conjoined twins.

Though Waker's grandmother Nana-North was English she liked to retell Ogelthorpe family sagas. Nana-North could pick up any story from anywhere and turn it into a cautionary tale. The lesson was always the same: someone met a dreadful end they'd brought upon themselves usually because of pride or new money. Her daughter-in-law's

family were a gift for someone of Nana-North's bitter skill. One rainy Sunday when Waker's mom was in bed nursing a hangover Nana-North stopped by and suggested an excess of alcohol had led to Ogelthorpes producing conjoined twins every other generation. This had led to circus work for the twins and weren't they lucky to escape from the back of beyond. In those days you got to visit Paris and go up the Eiffel tower for free if you worked in a proper circus. Nana-North approved of the twins earning their own money not just inheriting it like the rest of the Ogelthorpes.

Waker had asked her how they were conjoined and was she conjoined. But Nana-North just snapped: don't know and no. So they'd both stared out into the rain and wondered about Waker's missed career and travel opportunities.

Anyway, Coeur D'Alene had been so far away, until now. When Waker's mom told about the South it was mostly ghost stories. *How the Casket Girls got their own carnival* was not a tale about dancing in the streets but about girls so poor and sick, they'd been packed off to America with their own coffins for luggage to marry or die, whichever came first. The carnival came about sometime later in an attempt to appease their haints who wailed around the Sea Islands, demanding parties and pearls.

However, Waker's favourite story was about Saleenuh, named after St Helena Island, on the South Carolina coast, where she was born. Waker liked the idea of being named for a place, maybe when she was older she would change her name to Coeur D'Alene? She had some claim to it after all. Saleenuh, a beautiful octoroon, had become Waker's great Grampa's second or third wife. It was Saleenuh who had started the family habit of naming everyone twice. After her first child toddled off into day-clean mist while Saleenuh was in

labour with her second. Saleenuh believed no one had called long enough across the gloomy plantation. Little Comesees body was never found.

There was no photo of Saleenuh with the doomed Comesees as far as Waker knew but she'd heard the story so often she could imagine them glowering at a camera. Great granddaddy with a long moustache sat while Saleenuh stood behind him in a tight white dress, her thick hair piled high on top of her head, the ghost of Comesees, half hidden behind her skirts. Their other twice named children would be arranged around them in descending size order. Sometimes when Waker couldn't sleep she'd recite their fates and embroider ghost adventures for them after they'd died. She had a felt-tip list tacked to her bedroom wall using a different colour for each Ogelthorpe:

Comesees, (b.1838 d.1841) disappeared, believed drowned, age 3. Or eaten by gators? Or maybe Comesees was abiku who then infected the other Ogelthorpe children, most of whom didn't make it into adulthood?

Theodore Theodore (b.1841 d.1862) killed at the battle of Shiloh, age 21. Musket ball shattered his skull?

Tierney Tierney (b.1843 d.1862) missing in action at the battle of Antietam, age 19. Gut shot?

Opalina Opaline (b.1844 d.1854) died measles, age 10. Or the croup, though Waker didn't know what that was but it sounded horrible.

Lark Lark (b.1845 d.1850) died snake bite, age 5.

Tala Tala (b.1847 d. 1855) died snake bite, age 7.

Jojo (b.1848 d. 1850) died delirium, age 2. After a snake bite?

Augusta Augusta (b.1849 d. 1870) killed in riding accident, age 21. Kicked to death by an angry horse?

Katurah Katurah (b.1851 d. 1904) died in his bed at Coeur d'Alene, age 53. Maybe frightened to death by all his dead brothers and sisters turning up every night wailing?

Ouida-Mae and Glory-Mae? (b.1852 d.?) Possibly conjoined twins? Still alive, no that wasn't possible or was it? Two hearts and four lungs might mean a person (or persons) could live twice as long as normal? Waker wondered did this count as one child or two back in the day?

And finally MyOwn (b.1853) ran away with a Yankee so it was hoped her death was swift and unpleasant. Maybe her long skirt got caught on some farm machinery and she got shredded? That sort of accident was always happening back in the day.

The blurry photos were over 100 years old. And they only showed the outside of the house. But Waker imagined pushing through the double doors to wander around echoing rooms iced with alabaster cherubs. Her ancestors would stare down their flat noses from giant oil paintings arranged in every room according to their awful deaths. Waker saved the best to last. She would sleep in Augusta Augusta's room. This room, Waker mused, had been kept pristine to remind everyone how much Augusta Augusta was loved (except by horses). The wall paper would show a faded forest with exotic birds and deer chasing one another. There'd be a four-poster bed with a swirling canopy. Underneath was a secret drawer filled with Augusta's red riding jackets. And of course they would be a perfect fit for Waker. True she'd never ridden a horse but how hard could that be? It was all sitting down. And should the horse have an evil look in its eye she'd just ride another one. She wasn't stupid.

So although Waker resented the long journey to the back of beyond and the break from her summer library routine, she was looking forward to settling down in a large cool house that would feel like she'd walked into a novel. However, Waker was not prepared for a ruin. A fire had disembowelled Coeur D'Alene leaving a charred, scarred façade. Most of the shutters were long gone. But the best or worst feature, depending on your point of view, was that the whole house was leaning to one side, as if it had been rammed by an angry giant. Waker stared. It looked like it was about to keel over. Some birds circled the brick chimneys and flew away. The house waited. A jagged pillar jutted up out of the parched grass, to which someone had nailed a piece of old board: **Danger Keep Out**.

But before Waker had chance to ask *what the hell?* A battered truck appeared from around a bend in the trees with two large dogs hurtling alongside. One was black, the other white with a brown head. The truck bounced up and down like it was coming along too fast. The dogs raced and barked. Waker couldn't see who was driving but there was another dog leaning with its head out of the truck window. Waker and her mom stepped sharp to the edge of the road, expecting this carnival to plough past. But the driver slammed on the brakes and stopped in a cloud of dust just before he reached them. The dogs stopped too and waited. Waker stepped back relieved they weren't barking. They just stood and did that dog face smile where they let their tongues loll. The dog in the truck was a kind of soft grey, almost silver. They all had lean narrow heads with big floppy ears. Hounds, big hounds.

Hello? said Waker's mom, trying to sound confident. A tanned boy about Waker's age with a buzz cut leaned out the driver's window, which this being America was on the

wrong side. He nodded, then swung the truck door open and got out. The grey dog stayed where it was. Waker envied it sitting up high, out of the sun.

It's Theo... *junior*, he added. Waker kept her eyes on the dogs.

Waker's mom jumped in: God, last time I saw you, you were this big. She waved her hands around her thighs.

Theo raised his eyebrows. Waker felt embarrassed. Her mom was overdoing it. But there was more to come.

Waker this is your Uncle Theodore, my *half*-brother. I haven't seen since... in.... She left it hanging. They all stood waiting. Waker rubbed her nose. Theo put his hands on his hips then dropped them into his back pockets. Waker wondered what was around the bend in the road. She hoped it was a proper American house with AC and a pool. The black dog nuzzled her hand.

That's Merlyn, said Theo, and this here's Dealer. Dealer barked. Theo caught the dog's collar. Dealer stopped barking. And that's Pearl. He jerked his thumb towards the dog in the truck.

Waker wanted to say something but she wasn't sure if the dogs would start barking again. She wanted to ask about him driving a truck. Was that even legal? She really was somewhere else. Theo looked around perhaps expecting something or someone else but just said: Anyway let me git your bags. He reached towards Waker's rucksack. She slid it off and handed it over. He took her mom's too and stowed them in the back of the truck.

We left the rest at the gate, said Waker's mom.

I'll pick 'em up now. He said, getting back in to the truck and starting the engine. Unless y'all want a ride?

No, NO, her mom answered as he edged the truck past them down the track.

Can you drive in Georgia *at 11*? asked Waker, relaxing because the dogs followed after the truck.

I think he's 12, snapped her mom, scowling. Theo whooped when it hit a large bump. Waker had some serious questions. Had Theo just decided he could drive and how did he know they were there? And what in the hell had happened at Coeur D'Alene?

Left in The Empty

And then they were there. The whine of the power saw came from a large barn, its doors thrown open. There was a long trailer with some plastic Adirondacks dotted about as if the people who used them didn't care to sit too close together. Palmettos and kudzu fought for space with a pile of rusting car carcasses. Another truck cooked in the sun.

Welcome to Coeur D'Alene, said Waker's mom.

The saw stopped and a man emerged from the barn. He leaned forward and spat at the dry dirt. He nodded his head in their direction and rubbed dust from his face with two large hands. They waited. He took his time walking over. When he reached them he kissed them on both cheeks. He smelt of wood and tobacco. Close up Waker noticed he had that 1000 yard stare she'd seen in old photos of mad missionaries on her mom's side of the family. He raised his hand and ran it through his thick wavy-white hair. Waker half expected him to start waving a bible. Though, according to Nana-North he was a backwoods' heathen. Waker wasn't sure what that was but it'd sounded bad. He looked like her mom and Clay except her mom was darker.

Waker's mom's face soured at the trailer. I thought you were building a house... she said.

There was a pause. Then Grampa Theo laughed, except it was more of a bark. Waker jumped. He clearly rarely laughed.

I did. Some city-slicker heard about it and came and bought the whole damn thing. That paid for the barn, Yessir. I'll show all y'all.

They followed him towards the barn. Merlyn and Dealer joined them trotting here and there, sniffing. Waker told herself: don't be afraid, don't be afraid. She tried not to notice her mom's screwed up spoilt face. The no house situation and barn buying was pushing her buttons. Waker hunched her shoulders waiting for an explosion. However, when they reached the barn it was beautiful, new wood just weathering grey. The big open doors let out the sweet smell of sawdust. The dogs waited outside. It was filled with wood, planks and half-finished tables and chairs. It was cool in the shade; dust motes spiralled in the thick air. The floor was soft and crumbly. Waker wanted to lie down in here and sleep forever.

I need a drink, muttered Waker's mom.

Grampa Theo nodded.

Waker's mom rubbed her face. I'm tired, explained Waker's mom. So tired, Dad.

It was odd to hear her mom call someone dad.

Grampa Theo led them back to the trailer. Merlyn caught up with Waker and rubbed her hand. Waker stroked her smooth velvety head. The dog almost looked like she was smiling. Maybe this won't be so bad after all, thought Waker.

Waker's mom sank down on one of the Adirondacks. Waker tried to perch on the other. It was grubby. But she found the sloping seat meant she had to stand or fully commit to sitting back and admiring the strange view. The plastic was warm and roughened by dog scratches. Waker slid back and watched Dealer bound towards them. He barked and then looked kind of foolish sniffing about Waker's sweaty sneakers. At least he'd stopped barking. Waker pretended not to be scared.

Grampa Theo watched them, turning something over in his mind.

You'll be staying then? He said, more of a statement than a question.

Waker's mom nodded. She looked drained.

Waker wanted to ask where were they staying, as there was no house. And what's with the ruin? But her mom's eyes were shut. Theo returned, revving the engine before parking at the side of the trailer. What a jerk, thought Waker. She'd been boycotting the boys at her school along with her two best friends. They were just too boring and they did too much showing off. Waker wished her friends were here now and her dad. Hell if her dad hadn't died they wouldn't even be here. Waker kicked the dirt. She felt cross with her dad. Grampa Theo rummaged around in a cooler passing them cold sodas. He opened a beer. Waker's mom pointed to the beer. Grampa Theo handed her the bottle and found himself another one. He stood like he was waiting for his visitors to leave. Waker watched the dogs. Pearl settled herself down near the truck. Merlyn and Dealer sniffed around moving in circles until they found some shade. Waker tried not to cry. However, the jet lag was catching up fast. Her head felt heavy and her eyes burned. Her body thought it was in London, in bed. She rubbed her eyes. Maybe if she half shut them she could half sleep and still listen to what her mom was going to say.

Grampa Theo sat down. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Well you ladies are welcome here as long as you need. But it ain't much for city gals. Could be you'd prefer a pit stop in Atlanta? Or the Sea Islands?

Waker's mom sighed. No daddy this is just fine. I'm booked into the... retreat for two, maybe three weeks... Clay'll take me, pick me up. This was news to Waker. She was being dumped.

Grampa Theo shrugged and looked away towards Coeur D'Alene.

Well there's plenty here for churen if they don't mind getting dirty. He nodded to Waker. Can you shoot?

Waker's face burned, she'd just closed her eyes. They were all looking at her. No, she said a bit too loud. Pearl raised her head.

Theo can teach you. You can ketch some real Southern food. He smiled. Hell, they're selling Cajun squirrel in Atlanta these days. He finished his beer. I'll finish up in the barn.

Theo began to pull their luggage from the truck. Waker got up to help. She followed Theo into the trailer. The trailer was cooler than outside but not by much. An air-con unit vibrated somewhere at the back. Her head felt like it was filled with glue. Theo burped. Pearl followed them inside. Waker eyed the large dog. Pearl made a funny noise in the back of her throat.

Theo sighed and dropped her case.

Dogs don't like that.

This time it was Waker who raised her eye brows.

Like what?

Don't like bein stared at.

When Waker didn't argue he continued. It's like a challenge, like there's gunna be a duel or something.

Waker wondered if duels were something they had out here, it being the South and all.

Don't be scared of Pearl, she's fine. He stroked her large head.

Go sit, he pointed towards the other end of the trailer and the dog walked off, head down, sniffing the lino floor. But don't stare at dogs, animals, they don't like it.

Waker wanted to lie down. Her eye lids were twitching and her feet had ballooned.

Why's it called The Empty? asked Waker.

Just is, I guess.

Waker thought this was a crappy answer.

I need the loo, she blurted.

Theo screwed up his face as if her accent was so odd he was trying to translate.

The loo? He asked.

I really need the loo, the restroom, *the john*?

The john?

Waker nodded.

Why didn't you say, I'll show ya.

He sauntered down the trailer past a table and kitchen cupboards. There was a tatty, padded seat attached to the wall. Then, there was the bathroom. There was a ratty shower curtain covered in giant purple flowers. She shuddered. She felt a long way from home.

When she came out Theo was dragging her case and rucksack down to the end of the trailer. Waker followed. He kicked the door open. The room smelt of boy, sweaty feet and dead mice. There were screened windows on three sides and a bunk bed. Jeans, T-shirts, sneakers, more sneakers, comics, books, boxes, and piles of paper covered every surface. The only tidy places seemed to be a shelf for a gun and a fishing rod propped in the corner. Theo leaned over the bottom bunk to push up the window.

This'll be your bunk, I'm on top, he said.

Waker stopped herself yelling: MOM. TAKE ME HOME. We have to *share*? she said.

Theo kicked some of the comics and jeans under the bunk.

Yep, Theo replied. His eyes darted towards her flat chest, then back to the debris covering the floor. Waker sat down. She had to shut her eyes and lie down.

She woke up later steaming in sweat. A dog barked. Angry voices clashed outside. Then silence. She knew this routine; both her mom and Grampa Theo were drunk. God how long had she been asleep? Waker drifted off vaguely aware of more barking, yelling and a car roaring off.

An insistent knocking woke Waker again. Her mouth tasted bad. Thick plaque coated her teeth and tongue. Theo was standing next to the bunk bed knocking on the frame. He handed her a scrunpled note:

Enjoy summer break with uncle cousin Theo, just stay clear of the SOB. XXX
p.s. I'll stay with Clay tonight and head out for the clinic tomorrow. Back in
2.

Waker was still too groggy to get annoyed or even that worried. Her mom had stormed off before but she always came back, usually late at night when Waker was dreaming. Though out here in The Empty Waker's mom would need her own car or something. It wasn't like London where there were buses and trains and Tubes. Hell a person could walk but out here everything felt very far away. She crossed her fingers. At least her mom was trying to get well. It was just weird that her dad dying meant even more misery and then money from his life insurance to fix it. Maybe...

Uncle Cousin? was all Waker could think to say.

Theo shrugged. And that's, he pointed towards the banging about outside, the SOB. Welcome to Jour-jah.

Theo went outside. Waker got up slowly and followed. She didn't know what else to do. The dogs stood watching Grampa Theo as if he was some sort of side show. Grampa Theo got into the baking truck and turned the ignition. The back was now piled high with planks and three wooden tables.

Your Momma, he yelled above the truck engine, will be back when she's calmed the hell down. So will I.

He looked hard at Theo and Waker, using his 1000 yard stare, throwing down some kind of challenge he didn't want them to pick up. Waker stared back. Pearl came and stood next to her. Then Grampa Theo glanced at the dog and sighed. He dropped his shoulders. When he wasn't looking angry he looked defeated. He rested his forearm on the truck door. There was a tattoo running down his arm, like a scar: *a rich man's war, a poor man's fight*. Waker suddenly realised that they were poor. They lived in a trailer, the old house was done for, about to keel over. And the land was scrub and swamp. Barren, exhausted. No wonder it was called The Empty. The dirt was probably so bitter you couldn't even grow Ipecac or skunk cabbage. It was tainted. They were all tainted, like water from a bad well. No wonder everyone kept dying. Her mom and Clay and Grampa Theo could roar about until sundown but they couldn't outrun it. It was in their blood and the dirt knew.

Be back when I've done my bidness, he nodded his head towards the back of the truck. He looked up at the empty blue sky, and added: before the storm, b'habe.

Then he slammed the cab door, and reversed out of the yard.

Waker stared after it, rubbing Pearl's head. Dealer ran barking alongside as if it was some sort of race.

Welcome to America, she muttered.

Yeah, welcome home, said Theo heading for the barn. Pearl followed.

It's not my GOD DAMN HOME, Waker shouted after him.

Halo

Waker turned her back on Theo and Coeur D'Alene. But she wasn't alone. There was something or rather someone watching her. Waker jumped. A girl about her age was sitting on the trailer steps. She had crazy hair that stuck out in all directions oblivious to gravity. Cheap plastic sunglasses obscured her eyes. Waker stared, was this the face from the trees? But the girl got up, without speaking, ducked under the hand-rail and disappeared into the trees behind the trailer. A second later Merlyn sauntered out from the pines and Catalpa at the exact spot the girl had gone in. Waker rubbed her face. Had the girl been there at all? Maybe she was a haint? Or a shape-shifter? Perhaps Waker was going mad? She'd read about cabin fever and wondered if it was possible to catch it this early on. Merlyn wandered up to Waker sniffing and looking up as if she too had questions. Waker stroked her silky head. She felt better, brave even; alone in the middle of nowhere with only a dog for company. Merlyn padded off after a while in search of some shade. Waker felt like she'd passed some sort of test.

There was nothing else to do so she settled down on one of the Adirondacks. She shut her eyes. It was all too bright. And she was so tired. Her body thought it was the middle of the night.

Sometime later a yell from Theo woke her up. Waker looked across the baked red dirt and long grass between her and the burnt out house. The windows were dark patches in the blazing sunshine. They were the kind of windows you didn't want to look at too hard in case a face appeared. She was glad Merlyn and Dealer were between her and it. She

stood up. Dealer stood up and ambled over. Waker put out her hand but decided not to rub his head just in case he barked again.

Waker headed into the trailer. Dealer followed. Theo had soot on his face. A burst popcorn bag was smoking in the microwave. Theo pulled it out fast, dumping it on table. Waker was hot *and* hungry. They began to pick at the molten popcorn. Dealer watched them, panting. Theo rattled about and found what he called co-cola. He pushed it towards Waker. It was warm but she was too thirsty to care.

There was a tap on the trailer door. Waker expected Theo to answer. However, he was now pouring popcorn kernels into a pan on the stove. A smell of hot oil filled the trailer. Waker got up to open the door. It must be her mom. But when she swung the door open it was the girl. She stood at the bottom of the steps, looking down.

Hey, the girl said, Theo in?

Waker nodded. The girl took this for an invitation. She sighed and stepped up into the trailer. Waker shut the door. The girl sat down keeping her back to the wall. Theo passed her a giant box of Lucky Charms. The girl stuck her hand in and rummaged around. Theo turned to the fridge and lugged out a carton of milk. He poured it into a plastic beaker. Then began adding alternate spoonful's of chocolate and banana powder. This looked interesting. Waker was glad there were no adults around to interfere.

This is Halo, Theo said, over his shoulder. And this is Waker.

The girl nodded: I know who she be.

Say when? said Theo.

When, repeated Halo.

Waker sat down. She was still hungry. The smell of burning popcorn didn't help. But she didn't fancy the chocolate/banana combo on top of the co-cola. Theo shook the pan. The popcorn began to explode. Waker half expected Halo to ask her where she'd come from and even be impressed Waker was from London.

But there was something about Halo that made Waker wary. Theo turned off the gas and swung the hot pan onto the table. He then stirred the milk sloshing it back and forth in the plastic beaker and passed it to Halo.

You want one?

Waker nodded to be polite. Theo set to work. Halo leaned forward. Her shades slipped down her nose. Her eyes were puffy. She had been crying.

Clay home? asked Theo.

My daddy home, said Halo.

She slurped her drink. Waker decided she'd only sip hers. But it was cold which was good after the warm coke. It had a thick fake taste like it had been made out of cheap banana/chocolate biscuits but at least it was filling. Theo drummed the table. Merlyn barked outside. Theo frowned. Dealer padded closer to the table. Waker knew this girl Halo was in trouble. And it had something to do with her mom's new old boyfriend. A popcorn burst.

Tell you what, why don't we show Waker around. Then we can take the truck and stock up on supplies. We're bandun, said Theo.

Halo looked up. Really? You really bandun?

Hell yeah, said Theo. Waker's mom lit out with Clay...

Uh huh, said Halo.

Guess you knew that, said Theo.

Uh huh, thas how I got here, said Halo. Daddy dropped me off, so he could give your mamma a ride... into town.

Waker wasn't sure what to make of this. She nodded like she was keeping up but not sure whose side Halo had her on. I think he's giving her a lift to the... a retreat. For two weeks.

A retreat? said Halo, raising her eyebrows. Yeah, my daddy good at those.

Waker opened her mouth to explain that her mom was booked into a proper retreat or maybe, hopefully, a rehab thing. It wasn't with Clay but now she wasn't so sure. However, Theo stepped in.

And my daddy's gone to a trowbone at the Sunhigh. Reckon it'll be three days before we see his jook-ass... and for that I'd like to thank your mamma, said Theo, smiling at Waker.

You got cash? said Halo, narrowing her eyes.

Sure, said Theo. He twisted around to pull open a drawer. He scraped about and retrieved a dollar bill.

Hell, that ain't enough, said Halo, her shoulders slumped. White chile, you got any money?

There was a pause. Waker had some brand new green dollars for her 'vacation'. She hadn't planned to spend them on anyone else. But she got up and went for her rucksack. She could say no. She wanted to save her new dollars for some serious shopping in a proper place, like the airport, but she also wanted to help the sad girl. And 20 dollars might be a small price to pay to escape The Empty.

She held up a smooth 20 dollar bill and smiled.

Sweet baby Jesus, we in bidness, said Halo. Can you drive gal?

No, said Waker, sounding a bit rude.

Well neither can he. Halo jabbed a finger in Theo's direction. She chuckled: but we going anyway. That's if y'all don't mind waitin behind the dumpsters while he parks his broke ass.

Theo pushed a handful of popcorn into his mouth and grinned. Halo went back to slurping her drink. Waker had a feeling Halo was waiting for something; waiting for her to leave? Well she *was* the outsider. They didn't know her, didn't know if she was any good. Now Waker's shoulders slumped. All the things she'd be rubbish at out here began to line up in her head: driving and shooting and snake wrangling if that was even a thing. And now she was in the way. She got up and pretended to be interested in the view from the kitchen window. Then when Halo and Theo said nothing Waker decided to venture outside. She'd learned to 'read the room' when her parents' marriage fell apart. Sometimes it was better to be on your own.

The heat was dense, the air thick and thundery. Back in the kitchen Theo and Halo began to talk. Waker sighed. She let the screen door snap shut and headed down the rickety steps. Dealer and Merlyn watched her. Dealer sauntered over and made a small noise. He turned his brown head towards the old house. He turned back. He was keen for a walk. Waker felt better. She had something to do. Dealer got up behind her and put his front paws on the back of her legs. Waker held her breath and took a step. When Dealer didn't bark Waker relaxed. He's as bored as I am, thought Waker. She ruminated on The Empty. She couldn't really describe it. It was more a feeling, like the feeling she got when

she saw an abandoned swimming pool. And all the water had gone. But it was like it's was still there, only it wasn't. And you're kind of in it, but outside of it at the same time, and it makes you feel dizzy.

Thick clouds rolled across the sun. It was suddenly twilight. Coeur D'Alene glowered over the whispering snake infested grass. The first rain drops stung the earth, setting the dust jumping. She headed out towards the meadow. She wanted to stand in the rain to cool down. Her stodgy airport head began to clear. Merlyn and Dealer raced ahead. Then back towards her as she thrashed and kicked the grass to scare basking snakes away. Thunder rolled down the highway. The rain got heavy like a burst tank. Waker's T-shirt stuck to her torso. She wiped her wet face and shivered with relief. A breeze played the grass harp. Dealer crouched low then jumped up. Waker rubbed his head so he did it again. It got old pretty fast. But Waker kept it up as they neared Coeur d'Alene's moody façade. However, Merlyn hung back and then with a worried bark returned to the trailer.

Waker lowered her head and hurried forward. Dealer barked at the sky. Thunder growled back. Waker blinked the rain out of her eyes as they reached the sagging porch. Dealer growled and sat on his haunches. He waited for Waker's next move. Waker decided she'd come this far so she might as well take a look. And she wasn't so far away from the trailer, she couldn't hurtle back. Besides Dealer was with her and he had big teeth. Waker put her foot on the bowed step and then tried another. They were warped but springy, if she had the inclination she could bounce up and down. She didn't. The old house was waiting. But it wasn't exactly friendly. The windows were mostly boarded up, making the house blind. Waker tried to peer through the gaps and cracks. She pushed her fingers into the spongy bulging wood and watched ants crawl up and down the rotting sills. She

walked fast towards two dangling chains, to test her nerve. The swing seat was long gone. There was still glass in one large window but it was held together with slivers of splintered wood. One prod and the glass would slide down like a guillotine.

Waker crept along the porch, trying to peer through the half-boarded up windows. She kept one foot ready to run. Dealer followed. Rotten shutters obscured her view but as Waker's eyes adjusted to the gloom she noticed something. Words were scrapped into the battered wood. She began to read.

One day angel came present theirselves before the Lord, and Satan also came. JOB 1:6

She checked Dealer was still with her.

Sounds like a bad scene, said Waker.

Dealer lowered his head. There was more. Waker moved her fingers over the erratic writing.

the message spoken through angel was binding, every violation AND disobedience received just punishment. HEBREWS 2:2

She turned and stroked Dealer. She was glad she wasn't alone.

This is some weird shit, muttered Waker.

And etched into the grey shingles around the door:

We spied the Nephilim there. We be grasshopper in our own eye, and we look same to them. NUMBERS 13:33 and then baby hand rub off the glass.

Waker stepped back. The words were repeated sometimes in the same order; sometimes all over the place. She looked back across the meadow towards the trailer. Dealer followed her gaze. She wanted to reassure herself it was still there. She couldn't

believe Theo or Halo had done this, but who else? Did anyone else even live out here? She shivered. She was now wet and cold and creeped out. And what was with the numbers? Some kind of code? It reminded her of something but she couldn't remember what. However, she wasn't going to hang around and find out. She turned and clattered down the slippery steps. Dealer shot past her across the wet meadow and bounded towards the trailer. Waker ran to catch up.

Piggly Wiggly

Theo was sitting in the truck, watching her. Pearl was in the back seat, looking over his shoulder. Despite the rain Halo was adjusting her sunglasses coming down the trailer steps. Merlyn and Dealer barked and jumped about signalling in their dog-like way that they wanted to come too. Dealer lunged at the back of the truck but the side was up so he couldn't board. Halo and Waker squeezed in fast. Theo slammed the truck into gear.

So long losers, Halo shouted at Merlyn and Dealer. She shifted away from Waker's wet jeans. But at least she didn't say anything.

And they were off bouncing down the track like they were on some sort of cheap funfair ride. Waker held one hand above her head to keep from being smashed into the cab roof. It was cool with the air rushing in on either side. And soon they were all whooping and hollering like they were driving towards Christmas. Halo yelled. Pearl woofed.

Waker watched the thick green trees enclose them as they drove down through the shady hollow. So much had happened since she'd arrived, wondering where the hell she was headed. Waker knew she wouldn't be doing anything fun like this if her mom had stayed. And Nana-North would have been straight on the phone to the police. A laugh like coke bubbles fizzed up inside Waker and burst out.

When they reached the wet highway Theo slowed down and made a smooth turn. Waker was relieved to stop bouncing, just to sit and let the air whip her hair around her face. Halo gazed across the dark cotton fields and Theo hummed to himself. Two cars passed them. The last honked his horn. Theo gave a lazy wave of his hand.

You drivin like old buckra, snorted Halo.

Theo punched her arm and she squealed.

Yes ma'am, he said. Cuz I don't wanna go to *jail*. Y'all feel free to take the wheel any time.

He raised his hands behind his head like he was intending to sleep. Halo screamed. Theo laughed and caught the wheel again.

Waker was flying, not the flying where you were cooped up in a plane but outside like a bird. The highway spooled out ahead of them. There wasn't much other traffic just the odd truck. They passed a turn off where a skinny boy stepped out and flagged them down. He had a gun. Theo hit the brakes. They skidded to a stop. The boy ambled over.

Yo Stills, said Theo.

Uh huh, answered the boy.

Hunting?

Uh huh, the boy let his shotgun slide down his hand to rest on the dirt.

A lean dog broke through the undergrowth with a scrabbling hare trapped in its jaws. Waker and Halo watched in horror as the animal scratched to get free. The dog rolled its eyes back into its head and clamped its jaws down hard. The hare lost the fight.

Halo made a gagging noise.

Stills turned and whistled to his dog. The dog dropped its prey. Waker tried not to look at the dog's bloody fangs and the hare's matted fur.

Stills ignored Halo's contribution.

Need some? He said.

Theo shook his head. Though Stills was tall he only had two or three years on them. He shrugged as if it was their loss. He picked up the limp hare, unfolded a canvas bag and shoved it inside.

Hey Stills, said Theo. You wanna ride, we're going to the...

Stills held up a bloody hand.

You know my daddy don't hold with con-sumerism.

Theo nodded. Halo snorted.

Y'all got any ex-cess co-cola?

Theo shook his head.

Stills shrugged and turned. He followed his dog back into the trees.

They looked at where he'd been, expecting a Stills' shaped hole in the underbrush. He left a smell of dirty water, liquorice and blood.

Halo thumped Theo on the arm.

Aww what was that for?

You inviting that nasty white boy to ride up front, jest to show off you kin drive?

Theo swiped at Halo's sunglasses. She flailed around to get them back, elbowing Waker in the face. It hurt. Waker rubbed her cheek. Halo didn't seem to notice. Waker wanted to go at home. She wanted her mom back. Mum not mom, she corrected. She felt sad all of a sudden. However, when Halo retrieved her shades she passed them to Waker, her way of saying sorry, maybe? They made the rain look green.

Theo reached across. But Halo batted him back.

No way, we a team, said Halo. Uh huh, you and Stills one side and me and *this* white gal the other.

Theo checked the mirror and pulled back onto the highway.

We ain't white.

Boy not this old story agin, said Halo. She pulled the shades down Waker's nose.

You know this story, white gal?

Before Waker could answer Theo hissed: get down.

Halo pulled Waker down below the dash board. Theo grabbed a baseball cap from under his seat and jammed it on his head.

Po-lice, said Theo.

Halo giggled. Waker tried to keep still and quiet but she was infected by Halo and soon they were cackling. Theo tried to kick them but couldn't do that and drive which led to more laughter. Soon they could hardly breathe. The truck turned and dipped. And turned again and stopped. Halo unfolded, suddenly serious.

White gal don't got to worry, anyways.

Waker felt like she'd been slapped, just a minute ago they were making friends.

She ain't white, said Theo stopping the truck.

Waker pulled herself back up onto the seat. She slipped the sunglasses off and put them on the dashboard.

You *ain't* black, you *white* shouted Halo, pushing past and jumping out of the truck.

She wheeled around the empty parking lot. Her arms flung wide like she was trying to fly away. The rain had stopped; drops gleamed on the bonnet in the sun. Waker wanted to get out of her wet jeans. She watched Halo spinning around trying to out run something or someone. She reminded Waker of a pan of milk. Nothing seemed to happen for a long time, despite the gas being turned right up and then suddenly when you looked away the

milk boiled up and over the top; coating the hob in burnt skin. After meeting Clay, Waker bet Halo'd spent her life trying to keep a lid on things. Maybe trying to be cool and business-like like her mom in sharp suits. But Halo was a kid. She wouldn't have a sharp suit and anyway she'd be forced to spend time with Clay; enough, to spoil anyone's milk. Waker pushed her hand through her thick hair and realised that's exactly what Clay had done. Their hair was the same colour. Her wide set Ogelthorpe eyes looked shocked in the rear-view mirror.

You white, *white gal*.

Theo jumped down, tore after Halo and tried to grab her arm.

Quit hollering. You *wanna* get us thrown in jail?

Halo twisted and ducked away. She ran screaming to the edge of the parking lot, her hands over her ears. Pearl watched and waited with Waker. Theo hurried back to the cab. He wrenched the door shut and drove the truck fast to the edge of the near empty parking lot, the opposite direction to Halo.

Jeez, Waker braced her hands on the dashboard.

I can be white if it makes that much difference, she said.

They parked. Waker wanted to say more but Theo held up his hand like Stills. He looked tired. They waited. Halo returned to the truck. Stomping. Her arms were folded. She was scowling something fierce. The sun turned puddles into glittering disks. Waker and Theo got out of the truck. Theo rubbed Pearl's head, telling her to stay put. Halo looked less cross. The storm had passed for now at least.

What's a Piggly Wiggly? said Waker. She was looking at a big blank wall with the words Piggly Wiggly spelt out in large red letters. Halo and Theo exchanged a look.

You mean to tell me you ain't heard of no Piggly Wiggly? How you get food in London? said Halo.

A shop? said Waker. It felt like a test. She deliberately didn't say Waitrose in case Halo thought she was a snob. Or the supermarket, she added.

Whas it called? said Halo.

Well there's lots of names, lots of different ones.

But no Piggly Wiggly?

No.

Theo frowned. Do they sell the same stuff or different?

Well, Waker wasn't sure where to start with this. The air was warming up. She felt clammy. She needed to change her clothes.

Who cares, said Halo.

Yeah but if there's loads of different ones and they're as big as the Piggly Wiggly they might sell red soda in one and green in another. Theo looked across the glaring puddles to consider this wonder.

Waker nodded though she couldn't prove it.

Halo unfolded her arms. Ain't no green soda fool.

Theo shrugged. A car turned off the road and pulled up outside the Piggly Wiggly. Car park, parking lot, Waker translated in her head. Piggly Wiggly? It didn't look upscale like Waitrose back home, maybe more Tesco or Lidl? Maybe everything was made of pork? Yuck. She looked around. This it seemed was town: the Piggly Wiggly and a crossroads with a traffic light swinging by a wire. Over the road by a rail track there was a low wooden building with a porch, a co-cola machine and a sign: United States Post Office. Two more

cars appeared so they decided to head inside, as if they were joining a sensible shopping parent.

Theo grabbed a trolley and they sidled through the sliding doors. It was cold inside. Waker shivered. She pulled her damp T-shirt away from her torso. Halo muttered to herself. Waker waited for another outburst. Halo stomped ahead pulling giant packets of potato chips off the shelves and ramming them into the trolley. Theo just got on with the pushing. Waker followed behind scanning the shelves for stuff she liked the look of, it was on her dollar after all. The supermarket was filled with giant boxes of dried food, barrel sized jars and ugly garden furniture. A tinny music played somewhere above their heads but there were hardly any shoppers. They passed an ancient couple smelling of urine and hand cream. Then they found the Oreo aisle. Here Waker took her time. There were seven different types: the regular, the double cream, which Waker didn't like. She was more of a double biscuit kind of girl, though that so far as she knew that didn't yet exist. There was the yellow, too much like a cheap Custard Creams. There was the mint, again not so nice; a Watermelon, weird pink and green cream with the yellow biscuit. She picked up the regular noticing that you got three times as many for the same price as you got in London. And the holy grail of Oreos: the Birthday Party: chocolate biscuit with icing sugar not cream inside filled with rainbow coloured glitter. She grabbed as many bumper packets as she could carry; adding the chocolate-chocolate for balance.

She could tell she'd made a good choice when Theo and Halo helped her stow them in the trolley carefully so they wouldn't get chipped. When they got to the checkout Halo and Theo stood at a respectful distance behind Waker. The cashier bagged and Waker counted out her new dollars.

All y'all have a good vacation, said the cashier. They nodded. After the parking lot row they'd almost forgotten they were on the bandun and free. They exited the Piggly Wiggly with three paper sacks, one each.

Holy crap, said Theo glaring across the road.

Shit, muttered Halo.

A large white man stood watching them. He was leaning against the co-cola machine outside the post office. He beckoned them across the road. Gripping their sacks they went. Waker wondered if he'd been watching them all along and was about to call the police, at least they hadn't stolen the Oreos.

He nodded and held open the screen door. Waker followed Theo but Halo stayed outside.

Shells, he said and disappeared through another door behind the counter.

They leaned their sacks on the counter and waited, trying to look nonchalant. There were some leaflets on the counter. Information and maps for visitors and travellers read a small stencilled sign. Waker pretended to be interested in the leaflets. One claimed to be a Georgia Safe Map. Waker wasn't going to look inside but she knew she'd always wonder what *was* inside. The safe map showed routes to avoid redneck settlements, it said so in italics. More weird shit with old timey words.

The man now sweaty reappeared behind the counter. He put down four boxes with the word shotgun on the side and took the map out of her hands.

Some folks sure do have a sense of humour, he said.

Waker didn't know if he meant Theo driving the truck, her reading without paying or the idea that rednecks were bushwhackers and bandits. Waker muttered the words under

her breath: bushwhackers and bandits. The man looked sharp at her. Perhaps he sensed an insult. Halo banged on the glass. Theo put the shell boxes on top of the potato chips. He thanked the man and nodded his head at Waker indicating they should leave. The man followed them out. The screen door whined.

Tell yo Daddy, I said Hey, he said, throwing a glance at Halo. She nodded and scowled. Then turned and then stomped off.

Tell yo daddy? Tell yo daddy yo-self, she muttered. The man watched them cross the road. Then he lost interest and took his beer belly inside.

Theo took things slowly through 'town' then put his foot down when they passed a stop sign. Halo rummaged in the bulging grocery sack that was resting on Waker's feet and pulled out a bumper packet of potato chips. She glanced at Waker and raised her eyebrows. Waker nodded.

Thank you, Miss Waker, said Halo, smiling.

She opened the packet and stuck her nose in inhaling the greasy salty smell. Then she took a giant handful and dumped the packet in Waker's lap. Theo side-eyed it and helped himself, stuffing too many chips in his mouth and spraying some on Waker.

Pig, said Halo, putting her sunglasses back on.

My sincere apologies ma'am, said Theo. He watched a car up ahead. Waker wished there were more cars about. She was worried about the bushwhackers and bandits. Getting caught for illegal driving would be better than being bushwhacked whatever that meant. She wished they had Stills on board with his gun, even though he looked like he could be a bandit or at least a part-time bandit? They munched in silence for a while.

Shit, said Theo. I forgot. He glanced at Waker. Your mama phoned. Theo turned back to the road. When you went... exploring. She called and said she hoped everything was fine and she'd be back in two...

Uh huh, said Halo. We couldn't ketch you in time, she just rung off.

She thought my dad was gunna pick up I guess, Theo shrugged.

Waker felt her lower lip wobble. She stared down at the cheap yellow potato chips. She didn't want any more. Halo leaned over her so she could see the mirror and adjusted her sunglasses. Both Halo and Theo were oblivious. Pearl on the other hand nudged Waker's neck with her cool wet nose. At least she had one friend.

Theo spoilt it by saying: Don't even think about letting Pearl in the potato chips.

Halo took the packet off Waker's lap and plonked it on her own.

This is how I know you white, she said. My kin pizen dogs. She turned and gave Pearl the stank-eye. My folks...

Theo snorted.

Halo continued: when slaves ran away back in the day, buckra hunt 'em down by dog. And, here she ran a finger across her neck.

Waker bit her lip. It was all unfair. Her family were a right mixture. She remembered looking at their pictures back in London, now she was stuck here with her mom oblivious: thinking she was having a great vacation being looked after by Grampa Theo. And Halo had some nerve. She sounded real country but then the act would slip so Waker could tell she was a rich brat. Clay may be mean but he was clearly loaded and alive. Waker narrowed her eyes. She bet Halo even had a maid at home. A black maid.

Hell that ain't fair, said Theo. But he didn't continue so Waker wasn't sure what was unfair: slavery, poisoning dogs or treating Waker like she'd had slaves, back in the day.

Waker was comforted by Pearl's warm breath on her neck.

Anyway, we sick of white people tryin to act they cool and cullud, these days.

These days? repeated Theo.

Yep, nodded Halo.

Hell, the Ogelthorpes were never tryin to be *cool*, said Theo.

Got that right, said Halo, y'all appropriating.

Halo surprised Waker by offering her the chip packet. Waker took some and felt a bit guilty. She had been trying to be American. Maybe she was guilty of appropriating? That sounded bad.

Is that like embezzlement? asked Waker.

Theo laughed.

Halo looked at her. Go on white gal, say your piece.

Theo interrupted: You know as well as I do Halo *Halo Ogelthorpe DuCane* that we're kin and that Grampa *Ogelthorpe*, Theo tried to count back on his fingers, he gave up to continue his point. Halo munched some more chips. Grampa back-in-the-day married a punkinskin, and had about a zillion kids...

Halo was waving a chip above Waker's head. Pearl made a whiney sound.

Theo tried to slap Halo down but she grabbed her arm back and he thumped Waker instead.

A large tear ran down Waker's cheek. She hoped Theo didn't notice but he did. Theo jammed on the brakes. The potato chips tumbled onto the floor. He put his hand on her

arm and Halo did the same. Even Pearl joined in nuzzling the back of her neck. The sudden kindness made for a few more slow tears.

I'm real sorry, said Theo, looking down.

Not you gotta be sorry, said Halo. Is your great great great great GREAT Grampa OGEL. Are you crying cuz you *black*? said Halo.

Waker smiled and wiped her face.

Thas better, said Halo. She hoicked up the chip bag and pushed what was left of them back at Waker. Now you bess eat all them chips, then we'll start on the Oreos if this here fool can get us home. Home *fool*.

Tall Tales

Waker's first day was almost over. She was wearing her last clean pair of jeans and a tatty sweatshirt. She thought it made her look more American and it hid how sweaty she was after helping Theo and Halo drag logs and fallen branches across the yard to build a crude wooden pyramid. The dogs ran about panting while Waker had ferried buckets of sawdust and wood shavings from the barn to use as kindling or rather accelerant. Halo pulled the Adirondacks into a semi-circle and Theo went to find matches and torches. Waker brought out her bug spray and Halo dumped three bobby blankets next to their food pile.

Then the phone rang. Waker stopped. She wiped sweat from her face. It was late evening but the air was still thick and warm. She felt dazed and thirsty. Despite the heat Halo was wrapping a blanket around her shoulders like a cape. Halo ignored the phone. Theo leaned out of the screen door and yelled: Waker. He stared towards the barn thinking she was still there. Waker sprinted up the steps. Theo pointed to the wall where an old handset dangled.

Mom ... Mum? said Waker. There was that funny squashed noise you get when someone's covered the phone with their hand. Her mom was with someone.

MUM, Waker wanted to yell but her throat was dry and Theo was standing there loading a shotgun. Waker wondered if he was trying to copy Stills. She hoped he wasn't going out to kill rabbits or hares. God, what if he wanted her to come too. And rabbits tasted horrible, sort of musty and greasy at the same time.

Hi, didn't think I'd get through, said her mom. You okay?

Waker wondered what her mom would do if she said no. She paused and watched Theo carefully prop the gun in the corner.

Yeah, said Waker, noncommittal, let her mom worry a bit. But her mom just carried on. Now here's the plan I'm gonna be here for two weeks then back for you. We can head down to the Sea Islands. Clay said he'd drive us... with his daughter... if he can get her mama to agree. At this point Waker's mom turned her head away and spoke to the someone else. Waker suspected it was Clay.

Where are you? said Waker. She wasn't going to be fobbed off with promises of the seaside, how old did her mom think she was, 3? Her mom sighed.

Look I know Nana-North said its rehab, it's not. Well not exactly. It's a house, well farm really for women who've been dealt some bad shit. I came back because I've been here before. Before you were born, before your dad... Her mom stopped. Waker waited. She could hear Theo playing with the dogs outside. Then she noticed the sound of 1000 insects. It was getting dark. A strange cry echoed across the plantation. A Loon. Would they have to eat that?

It helps and it's sort of free, her mom continued. Well not exactly but...

Is Clay there? blurted Waker.

Clay? Her mom sounded surprised. God no, he picked me up but no. He's just kin. And talking of family let me speak to your Grampa Theo. He's okay once you, if you... is he drinking?

Waker panicked. Her mom thought they were being minded by Grampa Theo and he thought Waker's mom was baby-sitting them. She glanced out of the window. Halo was running about with her blanket cape flapping behind her squealing. Theo was running after

her waving a burning newspaper. Dealer followed swerving to avoid smouldering paper. Merlyn barked.

He's in the bathroom. I think he's taking a dump. Waker turned her back on the fun, hoping this cut down the noise her mom would hear. An no he isn't *ain't* drinking. Waker tried out some American. She wondered if she'd gone too far. Her mom paused and considered.

Well spouse there's no point telling him to call. I'll phone again in The door crashed open and Halo ran through the trailer, knocking the shotgun over. Waker jumped in what she hoped was the opposite direction to the falling barrel.

Bye mom, said Waker and slammed the phone down. Halo stepped over the gun and yelled for Theo. She flopped down beside Waker and caught her breath.

Fambly, she said and shook her head.

The pyramid made a crackling fire. The smoke kept the bugs away. It was almost dark but it was still too warm. Dealer turned around and lay down next to Halo's chair. She poked him hard in the ribs so he heaved himself up and ambled over to Waker. Waker was pleased to have a dog sit by her even if he was Halo's leavings. She stroked his head. She knew what being pushed out felt like. Pearl paced the darkness, watching, listening. Merlyn sat with her tongue lolling. Her eyes glowed in the fire light. Halo wrapped herself in her blanket. She sneezed.

We cosy? said Halo. She didn't wait for a reply. Now this be true *and* a secret.

Theo snorted. Halo gave him the stank-eye. He unwrapped the Oreos and passed them to Waker.

This is a *true* story. It ain't like all them Hoodoo stories with candles and such, dressed up to scare buckra tourist, continued Halo.

Waker blushed. Was this her? Did she look like a silly tourist? She watched the fire pretending she wasn't bothered.

However, Halo continued with a slow smile: It's as *true* as I'm settn here.

Theo cleared his throat and spat into the fire. He picked up a stick and began to poke at it, like it was some sort of animal he was trying to provoke. It was now dark. That happened fast. Waker heard a weird warbling sound up in the trees behind the trailer then a loud flapping of wings. The dogs lifted their heads but didn't pay this much attention. Waker shivered but tried to tell herself it must be okay for the dogs to ignore it. Nevertheless she scanned the black sky.

Screech owl, said Theo, watching her reaction. Waker nodded like she'd just forgotten, like she was used to Screech owls in London. But the only owls she'd ever heard were in story books and they went twit too woo. They were big and friendly whereas this one sounded strange. She leaned towards the fire, wishing her mom, Grampa Theo or even that smug bastard Clay were about. The fire was comforting but the land was too big, too empty. She missed streetlights, chicken shop and pub noise, buses and sirens, foxes and cars. Halo's round face nodded above the flames. Her head appeared to float, as if she no longer had a body. Waker hoped the story wasn't true or at least wasn't going to be a horror story. It was dark enough. The owl warbled further away. It was answered by another one. Waker picked up a sharp stick. The fire crackled and the Loons called their lonely call.

It was 1865, began Halo, smiling at her own cleverness. Crookety white folks gettin real nervous. Cuz they losin the war. No amount of reb yellin or, Halo dropped her voice, lynchin was gunna save 'em. Waker shuddered. That stuff was real.

Massa Ogelthorpe or Plat-eye as he was known here bouts was gettin more and more suspicious of every look 'n' creak. He started 'cusing every one of plotting 'gainst him, until field hand, even house boy all slipped away. Halo raised her hand and pointed into the darkness. Dealer raised his head and watched.

Till all was left was pale Butler-the-butler bought from England, and his fool wife Simper. Oh, Halo rocked back in her chair, savouring the telling, *and* his 26 children. 26. No you got to feed us daddy, they cry, feed us now, caterwauling to the sound of the swamp.

Theo looked about to interrupt but thought better of it.

Waker checked the warm black sky above her and behind her chair too. She imagined something crawling across the meadow. However, it was thick dark beyond the fire. Waker worried they wouldn't be able to see the firebats and choker-moths until it was too late. She shut her mouth to stop a moth flying down her throat and choking her. She really would be the stupid tourist then.

26 children and three *useless* adults, Halo continued, her voice rising in a kind of sing-song rhythm. Well he sho didn't want the *Yankees* to have *his* place. So he bundled them all down to the swamp, and (another theatrical pause) torched the *entire* house. Halo jerked her thumb towards Coeur D'Alene. The ruined house, waited in the deepest dark.

Hell, said Theo that ain't no story. 26 babies, that's impossible.

Didn't say all at once, some were old and some were real young.

Well how d'he feed 'em in the swamp?

Halo considered. Yo' sure you want me to tell you with your kin here all the way from London?

She she talk, muttered Theo, jabbing some sticks into the fire.

Waker did the same with her stick. She figured if the end was burning it would make a better weapon.

Y'all can see the result of his fire, said Halo, folding her arms. Fool thought he'd catch squirrel and gator. Feed his family. But he weren't no hunter at all. Hell, buckra never worked a day in his sorry-ass life. And Simper she *real* greedy. When Yankees came through 'bout, here Halo paused and frowned, making some historical calculations. When Yankees came through on their march to the sea, all they found was a po thin ole man, a scrawny boy and a very, very fat Simper.

So she... Waker started to say, not wanting an answer, but really needing to know.

Shit yeah, said Halo. She ate *all* her babies one by one till only itty bitty boy left to clean the pot.

Halo smiled. Waker considered. In war all sorts of terrible things happened. It was possible. She'd heard stories about sailors adrift gnawing on dead cabin boys. Waker felt cold. A choker-moth as big as her hand flew into the fire and sizzled. They watched it curl into a floating ember. Waker pressed her lips together. One less killer for sure.

What happened to Butler-the-butler? asked Theo, shielding his mouth, in case of more moths.

I dunno, he only the help. Probably still out there. Looking for kids to eat.

What happened to Simper? asked Waker.

Halo shrugged: dunno, burst probably. Or maybe Yankees cut her open to see if they could save some of 'em babies. Halo pulled her blanket up around her shoulders.

Waker thought Halo had finished but she started up again.

Old man *Ogelthorpe*, Halo cut her eyes at Theo, say he'd not bin eatin any kin. Claim to be Christian so say he stopped Simper eatin their hearts. Claim he cut them out to keep 'em from going to hell.

Merlyn put her head on her paws.

Some nights y'all hear 'em crying for their mamma and looking for their hearts.

Their hearts? asked Theo.

Uh huh.

Theo got up and dumped the last of the wood pile on the fire. Waker wished they had a whole forest to burn. She was creeped out by this character pale Butler. He'd be dead by now surely but if he lived on human flesh maybe he'd regenerate or something.

Well, they don't so much cry otherwise you'd hear 'em coming, said Halo. They more whisper and gurgle and hiss, cuz there's so much blood when you, here she raised her arm and mimed a demented *Ogelthorpe* carving out a child's heart.

More like a whisper? said Waker.

Yeah, like a whisper. It ain't the pines or the creek. It's a heartless chile.

Waker didn't want to ask but she had to. They aren't dangerous are they? I mean they aren't looking to steal our hearts... or something?

Theo and Halo considered.

Maybe they is and maybe they isn't, said Halo.

She got up and tried to drag her chair closer without getting scorched. Theo stroked Merlyn. But Waker wasn't done. She thought about the frayed black ribbons she'd seen twisted around the trees.

Why not lay them to rest so they aren't... disgruntled, she trailed off.

Theo stared into the flames. Halo rested her chin on her hands.

That's what Hoodoo's for, isn't it?

Twigs crackled in the fire.

Halo and Theo looked at one another than back to Waker.

What you know about Hoodoo? said Halo.

That's just ribbons and shit, said Theo. That ain't gunna stop the Plat-eye's bad babies.

Thunder growled in the distance. Theo almost jumped out of his chair. Halo and Waker laughed. Pearl woofed.

So what you do instead, white boy? said Halo. Shoot 'em?

Hell Yeah, said Theo.

All 26 of them? asked Waker. And pale Butler? She wanted pale Butler shot.

Nah, thas too many. You need some real old-school conjure.

We'd need a charm or maybe a big jar, stuff 'em in and seal the lid. Then they'd be trapped cuz you can't kill what's already dead, reasoned Waker. She'd done her research reading alone late at night in her white bed in her tiny white room. But that was when she had four walls and a city wrapped around her. And it was mostly too outlandish to be true though now she wasn't so sure. Did they even have any big-ass jars?

Hell gal, you real south now, said Halo.

Waker's face burned, but she was pleased. Pleased and scared. Skay'd.

Halo nodded. Thas a good plan, conjure gal. You ain't so white after all.

She ain't white, muttered Theo. And that ain't the way I heard it.

A few spots of rain slapped Waker's arm. She pulled her sleeves down. She could smell the earth. Dealer jumped up and headed for the trees. Merlyn and Pearl watched him go. Then they were all drenched. The storm ambushed them. They leapt up and pelted for the trailer. Theo hit the light as they tumbled through the screen door. They whooped, wet and exhilarated. Halo shucked off her blanket. Waker pushed her wet hair out of her face. The sound of the heavy rain drumming on the trailer roof made her feel cosy and safe. The dead heartless babies and pale Butler would be beaten back. The rain drowned out the Loons and Screech owls. She crossed her fingers glad for the shut door, the electric light and the roaring fire outside.

Theo tipped popcorn into a pan. He rubbed his wet face. We don't have any jars.

Eh? said Waker.

Jars to trap all the dead ones in. Baby-haints? We'd have to spend the next 10 years eatin peanut butter.

Well it'd sure beat the popcorn diet, sighed Halo.

She rummaged around in the cupboards, humming to herself. Thunder rumbled. Pearl barked. The popcorn began to pop as the lights fizzed. There was a scrabbling at the door. Merlyn growled. They all stared. Waker took a step towards it. She wanted to check it was locked.

Don't, whispered Halo.

The scrabbling stopped. There was more thunder and then a frantic barking. It was Dealer. Waker opened the door. Dealer jumped up and tried to lick her face. He was wet and very muddy. She bolted the flimsy door. There was only so much popcorn Waker could stand before her teeth started to hurt. The thunder made the dogs pace. Now and again Dealer or Merlyn would growl low and watch the door. Theo glanced up and told them to quit it. Halo turned on the TV but the picture was fried. A siren sounded in the distance.

Bridge is shut, said Halo.

Yep, said Theo.

Halo looked serious. We cut off for sho.

Are we? asked Waker.

Just until the storm passes, happens every time, gives the Sheriff's department something to do, 'sides playing poker, said Theo. How about a game of strip poker ladies?

Halo bashed Theo on the arm.

Ten minutes later they were all gathered around the table. Waker shuffled the cards without thinking. It was like a reflex with her. Theo doled out red shotgun shells for currency. The lights fizzed and went out. They all screamed and then waited in the dark, feeling kind of foolish. The rain drummed. The dogs shifted around the trailer. The lights stayed off. Theo got up knocking the table, sending their shells every which way. He rummaged around in a drawer pulling out a box of kitchen candles. He lit one quickly ramming it into a full jar of peanut butter for maximum stability. It was still very dark. Halo redistributed their currency and Waker began to deal.

She slapped down five cards. Halo and Theo watched.

Five card draw rather than Texas Hold 'em?

Theo shrugged, Halo nodded. Waker had the edge. Finally. She'd played a lot of poker with her dad when he was in hospital. She'd learned some moves but she'd nixed Theo's strip-poker plan. That wasn't going to happen. They tried to ignore the storm and focus on the game.

Theo considered his hand. Then banged his hands on the table and stood up. We got beer. He put down two shotgun shells.

Beer? said Halo. Ain't drinkin no beer. She matched Theo's bet.

Waker didn't want beer either. It tasted like bad breath.

You skay'd? said Theo.

Am not.

Am too.

Waker had an ace and a pair of 8s, she was good to go.

Theo liked his plan. He stepped over the dogs and went off to find the beer. This took some time and some cussing. Eventually he found several bottles. He plonked them down and rattled in a drawer for a bottle opener.

If you ain't havin any beer there's this. He pushed a tall grubby bottle towards them with no label. The liquid was clear.

Three cards, said Theo. Waker dealt Theo three. Halo took two.

How bad can it be if it looks like water? said Waker, pulling it towards her.

Theo popped open a beer, licking foam off the top. Raise y'all and see y'all.

Halo showed her hand: one pair of 5s and a queen.

Waker and Theo laid down their cards.

Damn it, said Theo. I was going for a flush. He pushed the shells towards Waker.

Halo set out three highballs. She unscrewed the top and sniffed.

Well it don't smell like bad news but I'm bettin it is. She began to pour.

Wow, Theo put up a hand, that ain't Iced Tea.

That ain't Iced Tea, mimicked Halo. What we need with Iced Tea anyways? Iced Tea and slave days is all the south got on offer.

And grits, said Theo. He swigged his beer, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

And caterwauling ghost babies, said Waker. She nearly said tall tales but wasn't sure whether this would offend Halo.

Halo held up her highball. Hell' y'all can drink to that. Bess be quick, said Halo, throwing it back. Waker copied. It burnt. Waker gagged. Halo opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out.

PIZEN, she gasped.

Theo laughed and banged the table. Waker grabbed Theo's beer. She sucked up the sweet, sour, cold fizzy beer desperate to wash away the burn. It only half worked. Halo ran to the tap, stuck her mouth under and kept it there, letting the cool water wash out her mouth again and again.

White Lightning, about 90% proof, I reckon, said Theo. He sipped his, curling his lip. Bess stick to beer, ladies.

Who drinks this stuff? said Waker. She needed a new mouth. She joined Halo at the sink.

Broke-ass buckra gagged Halo, sitting down.

Cousin Velvet, said Theo.

Eh?

Cousin Velvet drinks it, that's why you hear her caterwauling up in the pinelands.

Cousin Velvet? said Waker, testing her mouth still worked.

Uh huh, nodded Theo, dealing the next hand.

Waker picked up her cards. She'd got a read on Theo's game. She bet he tried for flush every time. This meant he was thinking ahead but not making the most of the hand he had. She wasn't sure about Halo. However, Waker planned to bet big and bluff them to fold. But she filed her strategy for now because she wanted to hear more about Cousin Velvet. Velvet was a sort of story book name, maybe this was some kid she hadn't met yet. Velvet sounded like *The Little Princess*, someone Waker would have loads in common with.

Reckon, but she be mad before she took up with White Lightning, Halo winced.

Theo pushed his bottle to one side and considered his cards.

Merlyn yelped in her sleep.

Well, said Halo, holding up three fingers for three cards. Who's tellin it?

Theo burped and nodded to Halo.

Cousin Velvet is kin to your Momma and Clay.

Your Dad? said Waker. She added two shells to the pot.

Yeah, Halo nodded, waiting for Theo's move. All three cousins decedents of the first Ogelthorpe in these parts *and Simper*. Halo cut her eyes at Theo. He shrugged.

But if Simper ate all her children, started Waker.

One lived, and he had a giant fambly, said Halo.

I'm gunna... Theo burped again, fold. Waker wondered if he was drunk.

Waker had three 6s, better than two pair.

Anyways, he had a shit-load of babies who had a shit-load. So way down the line we get the three cousins. But Cousin Velvet run off into the pinelan, cuz she favours Granma Simper. She been there ever since.

Roaming, said Theo.

Yeah, said Halo her eyes wide. Roaming, eating road kill. Raise ya to see ya.

Killing road kill, said Theo.

Waker put down her hand. Halo had two kings, not enough to win.

Waker pulled the shells towards her.

Halo dealt the next hand but carried on with the storytelling.

Yeah she got the taste of raw flesh. She can't eat anything else. And that White Lightning is like water to her. She drags stuff over to the big house, where she got some type of nest. Halo shuddered.

Theo put his hand down playing for time.

Just cuz we fambly don't mean we're safe, he said. One time...

Who's tellin it? asked Halo, helping herself to three more cards.

Theo finished his beer but left the Lightning.

They played in silence for a while. Pearl got up and padded about, checking the trailer. Waker was glad all the dogs were inside. She couldn't believe 5 minutes ago she'd been hoping to meet Cousin Velvet. No wonder her mom hadn't mentioned her.

Is she... does she ever come here? Waker glanced at all three dogs just to reassure herself she was safe.

Hell yeah, said Theo, arranging his cards. One time she was up on the roof rollin something around. It sounded like she had a human head up there.

Waker shuddered: but don't the dogs...?

Pearl lay down next to Waker, squashing her foot. Waker moved her foot slowly, inhaling Pearl's stale biscuity dog smell.

Nah, both Theo and Halo shook their heads.

Cousin Velvet she a wild thing.

Feral? said Waker.

Whas feral? asked Halo, scanning her cards.

Like wild, or no, more like a tame thing that's gone wild but bad wild, said Waker.

Bad wild, like it's got rabies?

Waker nodded.

Halo shrugged: spose. But his dogs know her, thinks she one of 'em. She come this way on a dark night and they don't even bark.

Waker crossed her fingers and hoped that was a tall tale. She couldn't remember a Velvet on the family tree. But maybe she'd been born in secret. A shame baby?

Theo watched Waker's face. She realised she probably looked like a fool with a bad hand. But it wasn't the cards Waker was worried about.

And, Halo continued, Cousin Velvet loses her shit real easy. One day she went into town, laid down on the sidewalk and tried to bite passers-by. Hell, there shouldn't be no passers-by, Cousin Velvet shrieked when she was bundled into the back of a patrol car. Pressed her bare feet up against the back window 'til a pervert tried to peek up her skirt. Cousin Velvet never, ever wears panties.

Waker imagined Cousin Velvet's dusty flat feet leaving paw prints on the patrol car's rear window.

Sheriff lost his temper with the pervert, kicked his butt, laughed Theo. Let Cousin Velvet out at the crossroads with a co-cola. Another bottle for her bottle tree.

Halo and Theo got into an argument about Velvet and the dogs. Halo said Theo needed to train his dogs to attack or at least set up an alarm when Velvet was prowling.

Your Goddamn phone never works in a storm and thas when she be comin outta the back of beyond.

Waker tried to follow the cards and the talk but she just had to shut her eyes, just for a second. She had a good hand. She woke up with a stiff neck. She'd fallen asleep for had no idea for how long. It was still raining but the kitchen looked different. The candle was just a flame sliding around a pool of wax and congealed peanut butter. Halo was asleep, her head on her arms, surrounded by shotgun shells. Theo was curled up on the side seat breathing heavily. Waker got up and staggered to the end of the dark trailer. She just had to lie down. She pushed off her sneakers and lay back on to her bunk. She was too tired to shift herself off the sleeping bag zip. It stuck in her thigh. The dogs were lying every which way but that was comforting. The rain drummed above her head. The room was way too warm but she wasn't going to open the windows. Ever. She was soon sound asleep.

In her dream she was back in London. Then she was trying to tell Halo and Theo what it was like but they didn't get it. They wouldn't follow her into the brick alley behind the flat. Tall buildings loomed up on either side blotting out the sky. The alley was so narrow she could stretch out her arms from one side to the other and touch each side. Then the buildings were moving closer together. She needed to find her dad to tell him so she ran, tripping over upturned bins and a dead cat until she burst out into The Empty like an untethered balloon. She felt dizzy and sick. And her dad wasn't there. No-one was there.

Scripture

When they woke the thunder was long gone. Waker peered through the screen door. Morning mist hung above the tall grass. She watched the dogs saunter around the yard, sniffing. Halo joined her scanning the horizon, she didn't say anything. Waker watched a bird swoop towards Coeur D'Alene's porch then dart away. She wanted to fly away too. She felt stiff and grubby. She missed Nana-North making breakfast, stirring porridge on the hob while listing the short-comings of both her parents. Short-comings, dollops of strawberry jam and scalding porridge. Home.

Another bird, a big crow, glided towards Coeur D'Alene's ramshackle porch. Waker and Halo followed its flight. But instead of landing it turned fast and flew away, squawking. Smoke curled around one of the porch pillars. It was seeping out of a giant black crack like dragon's breath.

What's that? said Waker. She pointed tapping her finger on the metal screen.

Halo frowned and pulled a blanket around her shoulders. Look like the house is afire, said Halo. They looked at one another and then together they flung the screen door open and launched themselves towards the drama.

Halo shrieked. Dealer barked. Merlyn and Pearl stood to attention, quivering in the early sun.

Fire, shouted Waker.

Theo clattered down the trailer steps holding a bag of corn kernels.

We need to see that, he shouted, dumping the bag on the picnic table, scattering kernels every which way.

They crossed the track and began wading through the grass. The dogs bounded ahead, barking at the new game. Waker did her best to keep up though the dirt was slick and slippery. But who knew what might be lurking in the pine woods behind the trailer? Even with the sun slanting through the branches they were still full of dark crouching places. The dogs bounced about, disappearing under the low mist. Halo was slowed down by her blanket. So Waker and Theo led the charge. It was hard to tell what was smoke and what was mist as it wrapped itself around their faces. At times Waker couldn't see where she was going. The dogs appeared and disappeared. Waker thrashed her legs about in an exaggerated attempt to warn any sleeping snakes away. The long wet grass clung to their legs like seaweed. They were wading now rather than running towards Coeur D'Alene, like it was some sort of busted old paddle steamer, marooned on a sand bar. Soon they were all trying to catch their breath while smoke burned their noses, staring up at the blackened cracked pillar. Pearl stayed with Theo; Merlyn sniffed her way along the porch. Dealer continued to bark. The pillar looked like it had been struck by lightning sometime during the night. It smouldered somewhere deep inside its crumbling wooden heart. Smoke seeped out but disappointingly there were no actual flames. The old house was not on fire after all.

Theo jumped and gave the pillar a flying kick.

Shit, he laughed. Thought I could knock it down.

Yeah, and bring the whole crookety mess down on top of us, said Halo.

Nah, she's bin here hundreds of years.

Hundreds? said Halo.

Theo shrugged. They stood for a moment in the warm sun. The mist was clearing. The smoke collected under the leaning porch roof like an old cloud. The dogs explored. Waker and Halo followed them. The warped planks creaked and complained at being stepped on after so long. There was nothing to do so they peered between the cracked boards hiding the windows. It was all another anti-climax for Waker. She imagined the dry house burning like a house shaped firework, all yellow and red and orange. With strange popping sounds as old furniture exploded inside. She wondered why Theo hadn't set it alight years ago. It wasn't as if it was worth anything, just one big-ass eye sore.

Whas all this? said Halo, reading aloud.

Big John de Conquer done everything big on earth then went up tuh heben without dying atall. Went up there picking a guitar and got all de angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne...

One day angel came to present theyselves before the Lord, and Satan came with them. JOB 1:6

We spied the Nephilim there. We seem like grasshoppers in our own eye, and we look the same to them. NUMBERS 13:33

Some weird shit, said Waker.

Both Halo and Theo looked at Waker and burst out laughing.

You tellin it real straight today, said Halo.

Well isn't it? asked Waker.

Uh huh, said Theo. Some weird shit.

What's a Nephilim anyway? asked Waker.

Some weird *white* shit, said Halo.

Don't you know anything? said Theo.

Well I know this from the bible but some sad Plat-eye bin messin with it, said Halo.

Dealer ambled down the steps and disappeared around the side of the house. The mist had gone, leaving the grass glowing in the sun. Merlyn and Pearl sat watching them waiting on their next move.

Ain't no Plat-eye, said Theo.

Waker was making a mental list of words she needed a bloody dictionary for.

Gather 'round ladies, Theo said. He sat down on the top step. Back in the day...

Hey, said Halo, thas my startin place.

Theo ignored her. A Nephilim is half human, he paused, and... half, he smiled taking his time: angel.

Waker looked at the messed up bible verses. She sat down. Halo joined her clutching her blanket. It smelt of smoke.

Now what you have to understand is they're clever with some real special powers but people *and God*, here Theo pointed to the bible verses; don't like 'em. Cuz they hybrids, neither one thing or another.

Like carrot cake, it's not really cake or carrot? said Waker. It was all she could think of though it sounded lame.

Theo considered. Exactly though thas some weird *British* shit.

Carrot *cake*? said Halo. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

Waker shrugged and tried to think of a better hybrid. She couldn't and she didn't even like carrot cake.

How you know all that? asked Halo.

Theo smiled. I read it.

You read it? You some kinda bible nerd?

Theo shook his head.

What kind of powers do they have? asked Waker. She wanted them to forget about the carrot cake.

They can steal your footprints and curse you to death, one time the Black Panther, T'Challa, was attacked...

You got all this from a *comic*? Halo chupsed.

Yep.

Halo and Waker shared a look.

I'll show you, said Theo, as if his comics were evidence. But first I'm gunna look around. Explore. He stood up.

Okay, laughed Halo, you do that Black Panther.

T'Challa, added Waker.

It was getting very warm. The crickets made the heavy air buzz. Merlyn and Pearl panted in the sun, their tongues hanging out. Waker rubbed the back of her neck. She was hungry. Halo twisted around to sit cross legged in the porch shade. Theo faced the door and wrenched its rusty handle. They didn't expect the door to open but it did. The sky clouded over.

Theo pushed his hands deep into his pockets, leaned forwards and peered inside.

You playing the big man cuz you got mojo in yo britches? said Halo.

Uh huh, said Theo. He pulled out a small faded pouch and waggled it by his ear as if it made a sound. Halo stood up. She made a grab at the pouch but Theo rammed it back in his pocket.

Don't look like nothing to me, said Halo. Look like some ole buckra bin makin money from the gullible. I got mine from a real conjure.

Theo turned to face Halo. Pearl and Merlyn joined him on the threshold. He raised his eyebrows.

Oh yeah?

Yeah. I got High John, thas the most powerful root, said Halo, looking at Waker drawing her into the circle. Waker nodded like she knew this already and to keep Halo going. Waker liked being 'in'. It was like they were friends. Maybe. Theo continued to look sceptical. But at least he didn't challenge Waker's joining in.

Halo stuck out her fingers and counted off a list of ingredients: snakeroot, grave dirt, horehound candy and a digit from a baby's finger.

A digit? scoffed Theo.

Yeah, thas a bitty bit of bone... a whole finger costs more. Halo nodded at Waker.

I know what a crookety-ass digit is, said Theo. Thas ridick'lus, you ain't 'posed to know whas inside... now who's gullible? Halo's lower lip wobbled which surprised both Waker and Theo. She folded her arms and looked off across the now steaming meadow.

Keep my daddy away, leastways, she muttered rubbing a tear from her check.

Well, now, said Waker, though she wasn't sure where she was going with it. Her mom had explained Hoodoo to her but it was all muddled up. High John the Conquer swirled

around with sucking candy, rubbing cloves and a real ugly root to throw on a fire. But she dived in.

We got our own conjure back in London and he says, say he'll tell you half of what's in the mojo and half you gotta believe in. I mean he can't charge for sealed bags cuz that breaks trading standards. Waker wasn't sure what trading standards exactly were but she'd heard Grandma North moan about it in shops before. It was a lie but Halo and Theo had stopped arguing and Halo wasn't crying. She wondered if she should have said Brighton instead as that was full of crystals and dream catchers, but Theo and Halo seemed to buy it. Waker waited. She did know that if you tell a lie keep it short and simple.

Spose, said Theo.

Halo nodded and re-joined the circle. Uh huh, is so powerful don't even have to wear it, cept in bed, when the moon's full. When them dead babies be caterwauling and crawling outta the swamp.

Theo shuddered: reckon we all need a mojo against that.

Whas in yours? said Halo, squinting at Waker.

Waker shrugged: roots and shit.

Theo laughed. Halo smiled.

Well as all y'all so well protected with *roots and shit*, reckon we can take a look around, said Theo.

He stepped through the open door. The dogs followed. Waker and Halo stepped up but stayed behind the dogs. There was no need to be scared with three dogs along for the ride. And a mojo with an actual dead baby's finger was bound to help too. Though, Waker

would have felt better if Halo had it with her and she, Waker hadn't had to lie about having her own. She needed to get one as soon as possible.

It was gloomy but not too dark. The floor was buried under debris: leaves, busted furniture and piles of rag. A wide stair case curved up to nowhere. The top floor and back wall were almost entirely burned away. So there had been a fire here, a proper fire. For some reason imagining this cheered Waker up. It must have been huge, ripping through the dry old building crackling the timbers and scorching the floors, roasting rats and popping chandeliers. The woods had marched in and taken possession. Great branches poked here and there, growing up walls and along what remained of the charred ceiling, rustling.

The trees crept Waker out. They were everywhere. In London the only trees were at the park, stunted by years of pollution and random attacks. But here they were everywhere; creeping up around you, standing sentinel. Poisonous Yellow Jasmine fought with very poisonous Mountain Laurel. Waker shuddered thinking of her near namesake. Spidery Catalpa and sinister Black Locust twitched beneath suffocating pine. This wasn't wind-chime country but a leg dangling county.

There was aloud thrashing. Dealer came hurtling towards them through the undergrowth. Merlyn made a high pitched whine. Dealer stopped. A massive burst of thunder split their ears. They all yelled. The dogs barked. Rain fell hard and heavy, slapping at the porch.

Instinctively, they stepped into the house away from the storm. Halo grabbed Waker's arm. The dogs went quiet. Waker preferred it when they were barking, their noise

scared her but she figured it would also scare anyone else, anything else, away. The dogs were alert, listening, watching Theo.

Don't leave no footprints, Halo whispered, eyes wide.

Theo and Waker pressed themselves close to Halo. There was more thunder and a flash of lightning. They all jumped, expecting it to hit the pillar and this time take it out. The dogs growled. Cold water ran down the back of Waker's neck. Keeping close together like a six-legged creature they made their way towards the underside of the stairs. They crunched over animal scat, small bones, odd lumps and piles of rancid cloth; pushing through spikey branches. Halo's fingers dug into Waker's shivering arm. What if there was someone or something crouching under the stairs?

Theo stopped and counted softly: one, two, three.

Then they all ducked under the stone staircase, hearts pounding, expecting to run back outside into the storm. But there was nothing there, just a busted arm chair. They squeezed under the stairs listening for the next round of thunder. Halo sat on the chair, pulling her blanket up to her chin.

Well ain't this the tour, she muttered. Gunna bump into some dead reb on his dead horse.

Waker and Theo sat down on either arm of the chair; the dogs stood between them and the rain.

Ghost horse could be cool, whispered Waker, trying to sound bigger than she felt.

Thunder rumbled, further away. The dogs relaxed and began to investigate the debris. Lightning let them know it was better to stay put for now. It was cramped and damp. The minutes stretched out like empty buckets. They shivered while the dogs moved

out around what was left of the house. Pearl padded up the stairs. Theo and Waker leaned out and watched her. They were now bored. Then without saying anything they decided to follow Pearl. There was nowhere to go but up anyway. They stuck close together. Waker felt better with Pearl and the staircase between her and the trees.

Halo twisted her hand around Merlyn's collar and waited on the bottom step. There were no banisters. The steps were smooth and charred, mostly black with some odd pale patches as if someone had been standing there while the house burned down around them. Waker decided not to look at those. Halo watched with Merlyn. While Dealer made a final sweep of the debris. The rain continued, sliding off the wet leaves above. They followed the curving steps pushing past sharp branches, trying to impale them. Pearl led the way. Waker wanted something between her and the edge. But the steps weren't steep or uneven. So there was no real worry about tripping over the edge, just the unsettling feeling that things weren't as they should be. A gust of wind slammed the front door. Waker jumped. Pearl froze. Theo grabbed one of the branches.

Just the wind, he muttered. He patted Pearl's rump.

The storm and the shut door made the house too dark. Waker couldn't see the corners anymore. She realised she was more scared than she'd told herself. This was her first abandoned building. She promised herself it would be her last too.

Y'all watch your footprints, called Halo.

Pearl barked at the trees. She nosed her way along a thick bough and disappeared. Merlyn shot after her, leaving Halo alone.

Squirrel? Theo shrugged. Helloooo... he shouted. Thought there be an echo...

I think you need walls for that, said Waker. Bet there were loads of bedrooms and chandeliers once upon a time. She pretended she was looking around at where those things once were. But really she was looking for the dogs and hoping for squirrels. She crossed her fingers.

Yeah and y'all know who'd be fixin 'em. Come on down before we get remonia, said Halo, adjusting her damp blanket.

Waker turned. Dealer had disappeared too. She wanted to leave right now, without the dogs she was worried. Theo whistled for Pearl and Merlyn, leaning into the branches. Waker made her way back down to Halo. That's when she saw it. Something moved in the gloom, behind Halo. Oblivious, Halo placed a hand on her hip hoisting her blanket around her shoulders. Waker stepped back up a step and bumped into Theo. Something about the way he was standing told her he'd seen it too. He whistled softly.

Pearl and Merlyn burst back through the trees, shooting past Waker, bounding down the steps towards the door. Halo turned and screamed. She darted up the steps two at a time, her blanket flying behind her like a cape. She barrelled into Waker and Theo nearly sending them over the edge. The dogs had skidded to a halt and growled at something moving fast towards the door. Waker, Halo and Theo sat in an untidy pile of legs and arms where Halo had knocked them down, watching what looked like a moving pile of rags blow across the floor and disappear through one of the charred doorways to nowhere. The dogs didn't follow. They stood their ground snarling, tails raised. Waker moved up a step. Pearl and Merlyn's bared teeth were scaring her as much as the thing.

S' okay, said Theo. Quit it. The dogs stopped snarling but still stood alert. Theo picked himself up and headed towards them. Waker and Halo followed. They didn't want to leave

the stairs but they didn't want to get left behind either. They all patted the dogs and peered into the gloom. Whatever it was, was gone. All they could hear was the slap of the rain and their own knocking hearts. Theo whistled for Dealer. He ambled towards them from the back of the house, muddy and oblivious. Waker made a mental note to stick with Pearl and Merlyn in future. Dealer was a rubbish guard dog.

What the...? said Theo.

Why didn't y'all... gasped Halo.

Maybe it's just a homeless... said Waker.

A homeless what? hissed Halo.

Homeless person? said Waker. The stale air smelt of sweat, grubby rags and a faint tang of urine. Waker let out a long breath. A real dirty person was better than a haint, any day.

Yeah, a homeless, said Theo. But he didn't sound unconvinced.

Ain't no fool homeless gunna live out here. What they gunna eat? Bugs and snakes? said Halo.

Bugs, whispered Theo, snakes. D'yall think it out there? He pointed towards the meadow.

Well it know where we be, said Halo. Ain't no sense in *whispering*. Least we got dogs.

They stood there all holding their breath. The dogs paced between them and the door. Low thunder reminded them of the storm and the trailer.

Well, said Theo, it don't appear to be comin back...

Waker and Halo nodded but no one moved.

Maybe sneak out back, said Halo, just in case.

Their dread filled the gloom. Waker shivered expecting to run back up the stairs and climb a tree any second. But she'd probably slip and die. The house creaked and sighed around them. Something scuttled across the floor. They all screamed. The dogs growled. They all ran.

The Fall

Wind moaned down the cracked chimneys. They skidded back under the stairs and hurtled towards the other side of the house. A shredded singed curtain billowed out from nowhere catching them in its putrid folds. The dogs ducked underneath. Waker punched her way out. There was a terrible splintering sound. Waker tried to grab at the curtain but it was too late. Her foot broke through the rotten boards. Then she was falling through a termite riddled floor.

Pearl barked. Halo screamed. Theo shouted something lost in the hullabaloo. The floor gave way taking Waker and Theo with it. They landed hard, hitting the dirt floor below. Waker banged her head. There was a quiet warm blackness before she heard Theo calling. She rubbed her eyes, her head hurt. She sat up slowly seeing stars fizz around inside her eyes. She felt sore and sick. Theo leaned over her asking something. He had to repeat himself three or four times before Waker could answer him.

You okay?

I guess, said Waker, rubbing the back of her head.

Theo looked up. Could this shit get any worse? He sighed, shaking his head

Waker realised Theo felt it was his fault. It had been his idea to come here after all.

Pearl barked. Dealer and Merlyn answered getting closer.

Waker imagined the headlines Tourist Dies in Freak Accident. White dots pulsed before her eyes. She felt woozy and very cold. It was now raining hard.

Shit, shit, SHIT, said Theo.

Rain hammered on the dirt floor. The dogs began to howl warning them to quit this God-forsaken place.

Theo stood up and yelled at the dogs to quit it.

Halo stuck her head over the edge of the hole; clutching the broken floor boards.

You dead?

Pearl joined Halo peering over the splintered edge, her eyes large in the gloom.

No, we ain't dead, said Theo.

Sho glad I got me a digit mojo, muttered Halo.

Pearl ducked her head, made a calculation and leapt towards them. She landed between them. Theo rubbed her wet head. Then he knelt down next to Waker and pushed Pearl out of the way.

Bess look at your arm.

My arm? She hadn't noticed her arm was bleeding.

She rubbed it with her finger. There was a lot of blood. It smelt like rust.

Lemme see, said Theo. Jeez Louise, he whistled.

A large wooden shard stuck out near Waker's elbow. She took the end.

Hold up, said Theo, frowning like he was some kind of medic. Try not to push it back in. Splinters can kill.

No shit Sherlock, said Waker. What a damn stupid vacation, she thought. She screwed up her eyes.

Careful... said Theo.

Waker pulled. The splinter left a hole. It filled with blood forming a big glutinous blob. She squeezed it with her other hand. It stung. Theo stood up to whistle for Merlyn and Dealer. The arm drama was over.

Waker got up. She felt wobbly but at least she hadn't cracked her head open. And maybe she'd even gone up in Theo's estimation. She hadn't even cried. He rubbed his face with the back of his arm.

We need to get gone. Rain's too heavy. He frowned up at the hole they'd made.

Halo had gone but they could hear her stomping around above them. She was acting big with her mojo bag protection and Merlyn and Dealer for backup. Her banging circled above sending down grit and dust.

What in the hell? shouted Theo.

Dealer and Merlyn followed Halo, their dog nails scraping the floor above. Thunder rumbled, Dealer yelped. What if the dogs ran home? They were the only things standing between them and whatever was out there in the storm.

Halo? HALO?

Pearl joined in barking for Halo. Dealer howled. Merlyn stuck her head over the edge again.

Theo began to curse. Quit stomping.

No sirree, replied Halo. I gotta scare haints away, makin a sacred circle.

She stuck her face over the splintered edge. Sweat prickled her forehead.

They could be tryin a pick us off one by one. I gotta... call on Dr Buzzard; she stopped, and withdrew her head. She hurtled off followed by Merlyn and Dealer; brave with the two dogs following her every move.

Jeez gals and haints, hissed Theo, balling up his fists.

Waker began to look around. They'd fallen into some sort of dark basement. It was like trying to see underwater. There was an old table with a cobwebby chair. Two shelf-lined walls were filled with rows of old jars and rusty tins. But she could see no stairs. Waker limped over to the chair and sat down. Theo and Pearl scanned the basement. It smelt sweet and rotten. Waker turned up her nose and watched Pearl sniff lumps and bumps of things.

Must have been a ladder, back in the day, said Theo. If we can get Halo to find the God dammed ladder....

A ladder was unlikely to have survived the fire, thought Waker.

Perhaps when Halo calls Dr Buzzard she could call the fire brigade as well?

Theo looked at her and stuck out his fingers: How many?

Three, said Waker. She knew she didn't have concussion.

Three, repeated Theo, shaking his head, as if concussion may be a good thing because it would explain Waker's stupidity. There ain't no Dr Buzzard leastways alive *and* there ain't no phone signal for no fire *brigade*.

Halo, HALO, Theo yelled, craning his neck.

Where the hell had Halo gone? What if that thing came back?

Waker joined in the yelling for Halo.

Halo's stomping began again but further away, maybe she was outside? What if she got struck by lightning? Waker told herself she did *not* believe in ghosts but she had a nasty feeling Coeur D'Alene did. And as it was bigger and older than she was, it'd win. Her head hurt and her arm throbbed.

Theo moved around the basement, assessing the situation.

What's that? he said.

One wall was papered with old newspapers from floor to ceiling. Waker got up and limped over. Someone or something had written over the top. She began to read aloud squinting in the semi-darkness:

See that you do not spize one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angel in heaben always see the face of my Father in heaben. MATTHEW 18:10

They ignored the insistent rain to continue reading.

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had they children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. GENESIS 6:4

Nephilim? repeated Theo.

You made them bit lower than angel; BUT you crowned them with glory and horror. HEBREWS 2:7

Out of praisehouse came 7 angel with 7 plague. They dress in dayclean, shining linen and golden sash around they chest. REVELATION 15:6

You who have received the law that was given through angel but have not obeyed NOT OBEYED it. Acts 7:53

These are... started Waker.

Bible verses? said Theo.

Yeah but they're..., they feel like warnings, said Waker. They looked at one another. They didn't want to read anymore but they couldn't stop themselves from seeing the meanings.

This is how it will be at the end of the age. Angel come separate wicked from righteous. MATTHEW 13:49

And the four angel who bin kept ready for this time were released to kill a third of mankind. REVELATION 9:15

They couldn't read all the verses. Some had been obliterated by angry scribbling. Some were faded to almost nothing. And some were drowned by spreading stains: *When the dead rise ...* MARK 12:25

We need to leave, said Waker.

She'd seen something else. And it wasn't good.

No shit Sherlock, said Theo, wiping sweat and rain from his face.

No, Waker grabbed Theo's arm. We really need to leave. Look.

She pointed to a newspaper story gummed next to Mark 12:25. The date.

That was last month croaked Theo, his face white. Waker thought he was going to faint but he stepped fast under the busted floor.

HALO.

Waker joined in. HALO.

Pearl barked. Merlyn and Dealer joined in somewhere above their heads.

Halo skittered back. She stuck her head over the edge.

Yo sure you ain't dead? I cleared them haints, Halo disappeared again, then stuck her head back, for now. I made a circle counter clockwise...

Theo interrupted: You need to find, but his voice was drowned by thunder, find a God damned ladder, he yelled.

There was a tearing sound. A worried looking Merlyn joined Halo.

Back up, yelled Theo, but it was too late.

There was more splintering. Another section of rotten floor gave way. Halo tried to grab the floorboards where they were snapping, forming a giant hinge. Merlyn yelped, sliding down alongside Halo, her nails scraping the wood. But it was too late. Waker and Theo leapt back. The floor was now a sheer slide. Halo and Merlyn tumbled into the basement. Halo screamed, Merlyn snarled. Pearl barked. Halo stood up and rubbed her backside. She pulled her blanket around her shoulders and rubbed her gritty face. Merlyn leapt away from the debris.

You okay? asked Waker.

Halo nodded and looked around. Now we all trapped, she muttered.

Merlyn growled at the busted floor. Pearl joined her.

Quit it, yelled Theo. Dealer barked above them.

Maybe we can climb out? said Theo. He approached the busted floor boards hanging by splinters to the floor above.

But when he pressed it with his foot the whole thing came crashing down.

Jeez Louise, we need to find another way out.

Halo scooted over to Waker and stuck her face close.

I thought you was *real* dead. She looked around in the dark. Like all the others...

Waker wished Halo hadn't said that. What others?

Well, ladies, you bought the full tour, said Theo. He rubbed Merlyn's head.

Is this yo basement? said Halo.

Theo shook his head. Halo hadn't seen the newspaper.

Trapped

Halo surprised Waker by sticking out her hand. Waker took it and together they began to edge their way around the debris left over from the falls. Halo re-hitched her blanket. Dealer woofed from above but he didn't approach the edge. Merlyn answered him. Perhaps Dealer could go for help, thought Waker like dogs in the movies? But who could Dealer find out here in The Empty? They surveyed the fallen debris, the swollen remains of large boxes and busted floorboards, crunching over broken glass and cracked mason jars. Waker spotted a small window set just below the ceiling. Tangled kudzu tumbled down the wall. But it was too high and way too narrow for any human to squeeze through. The trees sighed above them, pelting them with loose sticks and spoonfuls of rainwater.

Well we ain't goin that way, said Halo.

She dropped Waker's hand and stomped back to Merlyn. Dealer howled above, reminding them they should quit messing about and get home. Pearl and Merlyn sat alert under the hole looking up. Waker was glad they didn't howl too.

Can he go for help? asked Waker. It was worth a try.

Theo turned away from the bible verses and shook his head.

Nah, the bridge's shut till storm passes and a lone dog on the highway? He'd be roadkill. Theo stroked Pearl's head. You'd do it girl, wouldn't ya? If you was up there.

Hell, I'd do it if I was up there, said Halo. But we ain't.

Waker wrapped her arms around herself. Her arm throbbed. A trickle of blood ran down her hand. Merlyn whimpered. Waker wanted to cry when she saw Merlyn was worried.

What's eatin her? asked Theo.

Waker held up her hand.

Oh, said Theo, he'd forgotten.

Halo scooted up close to Waker: You gunna get gangrene for sho. But you ain't dying alone. We all got remonia.

That ain't helpful, hissed Theo. We need a plan to get outta here.

No shit, said Waker.

Yeah, no shit, said Halo.

Least we got Pearl and Merlyn if that thing comes back, said Waker, trying to feel better.

We need a ladder, said Theo. There's one behind the trailer.

Thank God for that, said Waker.

Yeah T'Challa bess go git it, said Halo. Waker and Halo smiled in the wet gloom.

Theo frowned. Well if you hadn't bin trying to Hoodoo that thing, I coulda sent ya to go git the ladder.

And sposing that thing be waitin on me crossing the meadow? What then? Least the sacred circle bought us some protection.

Sacred circle, sacred circle, sacred circle my ass, muttered Theo.

He began pushing boxes up under the hole. Waker and Halo helped pushing and shoving boxes and crates until they'd created a crude platform with the chair balanced on top. The dogs barked encouragement running to any crates they thought the children may forget. Despite the rain they were now hot and thirsty, coated in dust and cobwebs.

Maybe if one of you ladies stood on the chair...?

I ain't no lady, said Halo. 'Sides it all gunna tumble. We likely to break a leg.

Theo stepped on the boxes, then up onto the chair. It wobbled. Theo made a grab at the floor above but one of the chair legs gave way. He jumped clear just in time. The chair clattered to the floor. Pearl barked. Dealer and Merlyn answered. Thunder rolled across the highway.

Theo rubbed Pearl's head. 'S okay, nearly there, he said, catching his breath.

Waker waited for Halo to say, told you but Halo was looking around.

Well we least we got pickles to eat, said Halo, scanning the shelves.

Waker hadn't paid any attention to the dim shelves. She'd been too distracted by the fall into a psycho's lair, her arm injury, the dogs, the storm and Halo. And she was still scared of the thing. Sure it had gone but what if it was back creeping about above them, waiting. Or standing between them and the trailer, billowing in the storm? She stepped between Halo and Merlyn.

Dusty jars lined up along the shelves: some big, some small. Some had frayed ribbons tied around the middle. Waker took a closer look. The shelves were well away from the hole above her and whatever might be lurking up there. On top of many of the jars was a grubby dusty paper cone, with a scribbled zig-zag pattern making a crude crown; the sort someone would make if they weren't trusted with scissors.

Waker remembered something: golden sash around their chests...

But before she finished the thought she was distracted by other long forgotten debris: chipped cups, cracked saucers, jagged shards of an old mirror and baby shoes: knitted booties (the kind old ladies made), and some peeling leather Mary-janes that were probably very expensive back in the day. She had a bad feeling about the jars. The rain had

washed away some of the dust caking the glass. She leaned towards a big jar and squinted at the inside. It looked like a giant potato. She pulled her sweatshirt sleeve down over her hand and rubbed the grimy surface. The potato had eyes. It wasn't a potato. It was a face, a face pushed up against the glass, watching her.

She backed up, treading on Merlyn's paw. Merlyn yelped and darted away.

They ain't pickles, said Waker.

What? said Halo.

They ain't pickles.

Whatever..., said Theo. He wasn't listening. He was standing with his hands on his hips scanning the walls for something they could use to climb out. Merlyn and Pearl scanned with him.

I bet it ain't even jelly, said Halo, marching over to the shelves. She picked a jar up, knocking off the crown and peered at the grubby glass. Waker held her breath.

I've got..., started Theo. But Halo screamed and threw the jar down. It cracked.

Ridick'lus, said Theo, frowning at Halo.

However, the dogs lowered their heads and growled. A pool of gooey liquid oozed out across the wet floor. They all stared. Theo pushed the jar apart with his sneaker and leaned over the mess. It smelt bad. Waker tried not to gag.

What in the Sam Hill? said Theo.

They were looking at a squashed face attached to a kind of melted looking body.

Who'd pickle a doll? hissed Halo.

That ain't no doll, said Theo. He poked its body with his finger. It's kinda squishy.

It was all head and torso, squashed and flattened by its time in the jar. It had no arms or legs. Its eyes were shut and puckered.

Theo looked up at Waker and Halo. He wiped his finger on his jeans.

It's a baby, blurted Waker.

Halo bent down. Thas some weird-ass baby.

Nah, said Theo. It's a Nephilim.

They looked at the jar baby, then the shelves, then the bible verses.

They've got sashes and crowns, said Waker. Maybe they are kinda angels?

They look like angels to you? asked Halo.

They look like mutants, said Theo. Like I said: Nephilim.

Lightning lit up the basement illuminating the other jars. They crept towards them ready to turn and run if anything, ANYTHING moved. Pearl and Merlyn flanked them while Dealer kept watch above. Some shelves were filled with dodgy looking cans and chipped plates. But on others, jars were carefully arranged in size order: the smallest at the top and the largest at the bottom. They stared open mouthed at one jar after another. Waker's legs were shaking as she peered at three squashed babies floating in the three biggest jars. Their eyes were shut but their mouths were slightly open. They had chubby arms but their legs were wasted, curled up underneath them. In another jar the creature looked like a rag doll made out of skin by someone who'd never seen an actual doll or a baby.

Waker wondered if the crown maker had made these things. And were they coming back soon? Another jar contained a soft ball with eyes and arms just starting to sprout. It had a bobbly belly button.

Theo gagged.

Look, said Halo, pointing at a baby with its head on backwards.

Then they noticed a baby with two heads.

It's got a grumpy head and a sad head, said Waker. She moved her head from left to right for a better look. At least they were all dead. Or were they? Some of the babies looked like they were asleep but others had dark holes where their eyes and mouths were. Some had pointy backs.

Thas where the wings grow, said Halo. They died 'fore they got a chance...

Or someone killed 'em, said Theo.

Back in the day, said Waker, there was all kinds of prejudice.

Theo nodded. Yeah Nephilim would' a skay'd the shit outta people. So they do something like this. He shook his head. Pearl and Merlyn avoided the ooze and stuck close to Theo.

But who collected them? said Waker.

We gotta go, said Halo. In case the collector come back.

Dealer woofed above them. They looked up. He turned his head watching something they couldn't see. Pearl and Merlyn tensed. Their foreheads wrinkled, their lips curled and their tails shot up.

Maybe it's just Cousin Velvet, whispered Theo.

Yeah and maybe this here's her nest, hissed Halo.

Dealer shot off. Merlyn barked.

Waker, Theo and Halo stepped closer together. They looked at the debris willing a ladder to appear. They needed to move fast.

I've got an idea, said Waker. The shelves...

Theo nodded. He'd been thinking the same thing.

We can use the shelves like a ladder, if they aren't nailed...

But what about them things? interrupted Halo.

We'll have to move them, said Waker.

Pearl and Merlyn began a low growl. Waker led the way back to the shelves. She stepped carefully around the broken jar. The dogs continued to growl. The shelves were screwed to the wall but at the far end someone had added a crude wooden dresser.

Thank God, muttered Waker.

She started moving the smaller jars by putting them on the table. It was creepy work. They had to haul the bigger jars together. The babies sloshed around. Some of the jars contained bits of baby: a torso or a just an ear. Some jars contained barely formed blobs. One jar contained a puppy. Though, Theo argued it was a mutant Nephilim with extra powers. Dealer had yet to return.

Waker couldn't help herself. It was like passing a car crash. You tried not to look but just couldn't help yourself. One of the babies had its mouth open and one eye was bigger than the other. It looked like a cartoon character caught by surprise. Maybe it was surprised at their sudden appearance, crashing through the ceiling like falling angels. Some of the babies looked cross, their brows furrowed and their black eyes gleaming. Some were asleep or at least had their eyes sewn shut. Waker moved faster. She didn't want to be around for these eyes to tear open. She dropped a heavy jar and they all watched in horror as it rolled towards Pearl. The baby's little fists waved indignantly. Pearl whined and

backed away. Waker forced herself to pick up the jar. It seemed wrong to leave the baby rolling around and maybe it would be less cross? She rubbed Pearl's head for reassurance.

Abiku, she whispered.

Say what? said Halo.

Abiku... babies born to die.

Ain't no such thing, ain't nobody born to die... thas... Halo ran out of steam. She wiped rain off her face. She pointed to a small jar where either the baby had no face or its back was to them. See they got wings. See them bones. Thas where the wings would' a grown had they bin allowed to live. They're Nephilim.

Finally there was only the cupboard at the bottom of the dresser to open and clear. Waker hesitated. What would she find inside?

Go on, said Halo. We ain't got all day.

Waker pulled the doors open fast and stepped back. There were no babies inside just labelled boxes, jars and tins. They pulled them out: Cream of Tartar, saffron, Pennyroyal tea, Virginia snakeroot and horehound.

Hoodoo, said Theo, watching the contents skitter across the slick floor.

Hoodoo, hurry up, said Halo.

Now the dresser was empty they began to pull and push it away from the wall. It was heavier than it looked but it began to budge. The wet slippery floor helped. However, when Theo barged it too hard the dresser toppled over, catching the table and crashing to the floor. Jars smashed. The dogs barked. Some of the Nephilim were now free. Blobs and liquid covered the floor. Pearl tried to join Theo but the broken glass stopped her crossing

the floor. She waited, shivering, her ears flat. Halo and Waker pressed themselves against the newspaper wall with Merlyn.

Holy Moses, said Theo.

Halo and Waker nodded. They all stepped forward, as if propelled by telepathy, past the rancid oozing detritus. They were all trying not to scream. They grabbed the dresser and wrenched it off the floor. They moved fast lifting, dragging and pushing until the dresser was standing under the hole in the basement ceiling. Merlyn barked. Pearl sniffed the floor growling.

I'll go first, said Halo.

She shucked off her blanket and handed it to Waker. Then she stood looking up unsure how to start. Theo leaned over and made a stirrup with his hands, giving Halo a foot boost so she could step up onto the cupboard top. Her legs trembled but she held onto the shelf above her head. She didn't look up. Waker and Theo stood either side of the shelves to steady them. Halo climbed very slowly, her teeth biting her lower lip. The rain had stopped but the shelves were wet and slippery. Dealer reappeared to bark encouragement above.

Quit it, hissed Theo. Dealer stopped and watched, occasionally turning his head towards God knew what, listening. Waker didn't like this, she preferred the barking. It was very quiet, too quiet. Even the storm was quiet. Waker felt like the old ruin was listening, listening to them.

You're gunna have to stand on the top, said Theo.

No shit... muttered Halo.

The dresser wobbled. Halo paused. Theo and Waker held on and braced themselves. Merlyn whimpered. Dealer barked. Pearl paced about. Waker was glad Pearl was between them and the Nephilim. Halo could now see the floor above, she scanned around.

Ain't nothing here, 'cept Dealer, she said.

She grabbed the edge of the splintered floor around the hole, found a section she could hold and used it to steady herself. Then she knelt on the top before slowly standing up.

What now? she asked.

Hell, I don't know, said Theo. You gunna have to jump or something.

Waker could see there was flaw in her plan. What now? But before she could think of a solution, Halo hurled herself onto the rotten floor. Dealer yelped and sprang away. Halo's legs kicked out behind her trying to find some leverage. One foot hit the shelves nearly knocking them over but it gave her enough force to push herself further onto the floor and away from the edge.

Woohoo, she shouted.

Stay away from the edge, shouted Waker.

Halo scabbled away.

You go next, said Waker, too shaky to start. Theo was light and fast but it was hard for Waker to keep the shelves from toppling over. It was never going to work with no-one to steady it for her and the dogs wouldn't make it either. She was alone in the basement with Pearl, Merlyn and the Nephilim.

Wait there, yelled Theo, I'll git the ladder.

Before Waker could reply Theo, Halo and Dealer ran off. She heard them bounce down the steps and then silence. She pulled Halo's blanket around her shoulders and sat down with her back to the Nephilim. She lowered her head so she couldn't read the bible verses. She hugged her knees glad Pearl and Merlyn sat either side of her. It was getting dark. This meant she could no longer see the corners of the basement. Water dripped onto her head and thunder rumbled in the distance. Waker rubbed Pearl's back. The dog was warm and greasy. Waker breathed in their dog smell. She tried to tot up how many seconds it would take for Theo to return with a ladder. 40 maybe if she counted 1 and 2 and 3 and.... When she'd counted to 120 seconds she quit and put her arm around Pearl's neck. Time moved very slowly in the basement. Waker had the creepy feeling the Nephilim were moving but she was too scared to look around. She hunched up her shoulders and tightened her hug on Pearl. But Pearl curled her lips showing her teeth and began a low growl. Waker stood up instinctively and stepped away. The dog was frightening her. However, Pearl paid her no attention. She was looking up. Merlyn did the same. Waker looked up. In the gloom she could see something leaning over the edge towards her. And it wasn't Theo or Dealer. Waker screamed. The dogs barked and jumped up. Whatever it was shot back and disappeared out of sight.

THEO, shouted Waker. HALO, HELP. HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELP.

The dogs kept barking and snarling. The seconds felt like hours. Waker span around glaring up at the hole and then back at the Nephilim. Then above the hullabaloo she heard Theo.

S'okay, 'okay, ain't nothing to be skay'd of, jest a storm... The dogs settled as he talked them down. He began to push the metal step ladder over the edge. Waker's chest heaved and her face was coated in snot. But she caught the ladder.

Y'all need to... Theo chewed his lip in concentration. Waker nodded and pushed the legs apart on the basement floor forming a sturdy triangle. Merlyn bolted for the ladder but waited for Waker to climb up. However, she followed so fast she over took Waker at the top. Theo caught her arm and whistled for Pearl to follow.

Run, Waker hissed. RUN.

Theo tightened his grip on her arm and together they pelted across the ruined hall, out the door and down the steps, flanked by the dogs. They didn't stop until they'd clattered up the trailer steps and slammed the door.

Halo locked the door and they all backed away until they were pinned against the kitchen cupboards and the sink. The dogs stayed between them and the door. They gulped for air. The dogs panted but stood alert. Then there was a noise. It was across the meadow - for now. Waker, Theo and Halo exchanged worried looks. The dogs' hair rose and they bared their teeth. The noise became a long wail. Waker wasn't sure if it was human, animal or something else. Theo lunged for the shotgun and wrenched open a draw grabbing shells by the fistful. Waker ran up and down the trailer checking the windows were shut and locked. She pulled the curtains and yanked down any blinds. Halo pulled the table in front of the door and braced herself for impact. The dogs continued to listen intently.

Hurry, hurry, HURRY, yelled Halo.

Theo went and stood by the kitchen window, resting his loaded shotgun against his leg. Waker and Halo held their breath. The awful wailing continued.

What's out there? said Halo.

Nothing, just The Empty, whispered Theo.

Waker and Halo leaned over his shoulder to make sure.

Then was makin that noise?

I saw it, said Waker. When you went for the ladder, there was something...

Halo grabbed her arm. Was it one of them caterwauling babies?

Waker shook her head. The noise stopped.

Now thas worse, said Theo. Can't hear where it's at.

Halo went back to bracing the table. Waker joined her; cold sweat ran down her back.

Theo continued to scan the meadow. Pearl squirmed under the table blocking the door.

Merlyn paced around checking the perimeter. Dealer stayed near Theo. Waker had never seen a dog look worried before but Dealer looked worried. This terrified Waker.

We under siege? asked Halo.

Could be, said Theo.

Y'all reckon its Cousin Velvet? said Halo.

Could be, said Theo.

They waited. Nothing. Waker was thirsty. Her arm hurt. Theo slid down the wall and sat down, holding the gun upright between his knees. Halo chewed her nails. It got dark but no-one moved.

There's something on the roof

It started to rain again. They listened to the drum above them. Waker felt a bit better. The rain reminded her of home and it put something between them and the wailer. Dealer began to fuss about going outside. Theo shook himself, got up, edged around the table and slowly opened the door. Dealer shot out. Merlyn and Pearl followed him down the steps. Theo stood against the dark rectangle of night sky. The cool rain-chilled-air was a relief after the stuffy trailer. Halo began to organise matches and candles. But she didn't light anything. Waker gathered the remaining Oreos on the table. It was better to have something to do. After her dad died Waker had spent whole days with Nana-North reorganising the kitchen cupboards. Theo whistled. Pearl and Merlyn returned. Dealer of course didn't. Waker wanted Theo to shut the door. It was too dark to see the meadow or Coeur D'Alene. Who knew what might be crawling towards them.

Jeez, muttered Theo. He propped the shotgun by the door and made his way down the steps. The screen slapped behind him. Waker and Halo peered at his disappearing back.

Jess leave 'im be, whispered Halo, rummaging around the kitchen until she found a flashlight.

Waker wasn't sure if Halo meant leave Dealer out there in The Empty or if she was talking to the thing to leave Theo alone. Theo didn't go far. He whistled and then came back soaked.

Damn fool dog, he said, rubbing his wet head and shoving the table out of the way.

Halo lit a candle. The rain got heavier. They looked at the Oreos. No-one was hungry. A wild scrabbling at the door made them all jump.

Dealer, shrugged Theo.

He opened the door. Dealer bounded in. He didn't bark but made a coughing sound. He dropped something at Waker's feet. It glistened with dog drool. It was a small body with sewn up eyes. Something had followed them out.

Jesus Dealer where d'you git that? shouted Theo.

Dealer sat next to his find wagging his tail. Merlyn and Pearl kept their distance.

We got trubble fo sure now, said Halo.

But Dealer hasn't been in the basement, has he? said Waker.

They free now, said Halo. That one gunna lead the others...

The others? Theo looked at Halo.

Nephilim, said Halo. The Nephilim.

There was a loud thump on the trailer roof. Pearl and Merlyn stood up and eyed the ceiling. Dealer barked. Theo lifted the shotgun. Waker tried to watch the door, the Nephilim and above her head, all at the same time. Halo put up a finger indicating they should all be quiet. Dealer woofed and waited. What happened next caused them all to panic. Something large was running up and down on the roof.

Shoot it, shouted Halo.

Caint shoot what I caint see, shouted Theo.

Then shoot out the door, skay it away.

It stopped running and began to wail. The dogs growled. They all stared saucer eyed at the flimsy door. Pearl stood next to Theo. Merlyn stood in front of Halo. Dealer and Waker backed towards the stove.

It's Cousin Velvet, whispered Theo. She back fo sho.

Dealer shot forward and began clawing the door.

He's gunna let her in, squealed Halo.

Theo yanked him away.

There was a shriek, followed by more wailing above them. Theo raised the shotgun. Pearl and Merlyn snarled. Waker's heart pounded. Words formed in the storm.

My'own, My'own, My'own.

Whas that mean? hissed Halo.

Waker checked the Nephilim, just in case it'd crawled towards her or worse disappeared. They couldn't kill it. It was already dead.

It was still where Dealer had dumped it. The wailing words continued rising to an angry crescendo fighting with the rain to be heard.

My'own? Maybe...? thought Waker.

She leapt forward, clawed up the soggy Nephilim and unlatched the door.

NOOOOO, yelled Theo and Halo.

Waker yanked it open and hurled the glutinous baby outside. She slammed the door and held onto the latch. The wailing stopped. They crowded around the kitchen window and peered out.

It's too dark, said Halo.

Shush, there's something moving, said Waker. It looked like a pile of rags billowing towards the Nephilim.

Cousin Velvet, whispered Theo. He grabbed the flashlight and poked it towards the yard.

Turn it off, said Halo.

Nah, s'okay, she don't like lights, said Theo.

They all peered out of a window following the feeble torch beam. The rags crouched down over the Nephilim, and scooped it up. Then, it or she - Waker wasn't sure - loped off into the black.

Theo sat down, he looked pale. He rubbed Pearl's head. Waker washed her hands and then washed them again. Halo continued to watch the door. Waker and Halo started to speak at the same time. Waker stopped and waited for Halo. Her hands were shaking so she kept hold of the threadbare kitchen towel. Her mouth was dry.

Sho glad you chunked that baby back to Cousin Velvet. She'd be tearin the roof off with her long nails... Halo nodded and stared at where the Nephilim baby had just been to double check it was gone. Theo rubbed his tired face. He looked like Grampa Theo.

D'you think she'll come back? asked Waker.

Theo shrugged. Halo shook her head. Waker didn't think it was the time to explain she'd thought Cousin Velvet was a tall tale. The ragged shape reminded her of another tall tale about a family who kept a bear in their house until it ate their dad. Then they just moved upstairs. Waker looked up. There was no upstairs here and maybe that was true too?

Bess keep watch, take it in turns, suggested Halo.

Theo stayed where he was near the shotgun. Halo knelt on a chair and peered out of the window. Waker took the flashlight and headed into their bedroom. She felt a long way from the others but she thought it was a mistake not to cover each end of the trailer. Besides Merlyn ambled after her and settled down on the floor to keep her company. Waker was glad now that Theo had three big dogs.

Waker woke up sometime later. She felt like she hadn't eaten for a week. For a moment she didn't know where she was. Her eyes adjusted to the dawn. She'd somehow made it to bed in the middle of the night. Then Pearl barked followed by Merlyn. She could hear Theo's noisy boy breathing. He must be sprawled on his bunk. But where was Halo? Was she alone in the kitchen? And what about Cousin Velvet?

Rain still drummed on the roof, reminding Waker she was totally thirsty. She kicked her way out of her clammy sleeping bag. The stuffy room smelt of garbage. She leaned over and eased herself towards the floor. She splashed down into cold water. What? The floor was moving, slopping around. What the hell? Waker jumped back on to the thin mattress. She peered around the room trying to fit the pieces together.

THEO, she hissed.

Theo muttered in his sleep. Waker punched Theo's mattress. The dogs barked again. Waker could hear their nails scrapping up and down above her head. They were on the roof. That meant the door was open. Velvet could get in.

Theo wake up, shouted Waker, punching hard.

Eh? What? Theo scowled into the gloom.

Halo screamed. This propelled them both off the bunk and into the water. They splashed towards the kitchen without stopping to wonder why they were getting wet. Muddy water whirled around their ankles. Half-empty Oreo packets, comics and cans floated around bobbing against their legs. Halo was standing on the table, one arm braced against the ceiling. Her face was imprinted with whatever she'd fallen asleep on.

Snake, she whispered, brandishing her flashlight like a club.

Theo stopped, Waker banged into him. A snake zig-zagged fast across the soupy water. Halo hurled the flashlight but missed the fast moving snake. Waker jumped back and stumbled towards the bedroom. She climbed the bunk screaming with Halo. The dogs went mad on the roof.

Quit yelling, yelled Theo, it's a water snake.

Waker heard him slosh towards the door. She didn't care what sort of snake it was. It was as long as her leg. Could it slide up the bunk? What if there were more? She kicked Theo's grubby sleeping bag to the end of the bed, keeping a smooth space between her and the lumpy nylon. She kept looking around. She knew Halo would be doing the same. Hell, she was probably standing on one leg.

Theo rattled about looking for something to hook the snake.

Just kill it, whimpered Halo.

Nah, it's harmless... muttered Theo.

What was happening now? Waker hugged her knees and prayed: Please God don't let Theo get bit.

He's gone, shouted Theo.

Shut the damn door, squealed Halo.

I can't, water's.... He didn't finish. A tide pushed more water into the trailer.

Holy Moses, shouted Theo.

Waker peered down into the dark water. There could be anything slithering underneath the soggy comics. Water lapped the bunks. Soon she'd be cut off. Hell, she might even drown. She shivered. If she was going to move she'd have to go now and quick-fast. Count, she told herself. By the time I reach three I'll be next to Halo. It's not that far.

One, Waker launched herself off the bunk, into the water. TWO, she yelled, hurtling towards the kitchen. THREE.

Three what? shouted Halo, grabbing Waker's hand and pulling her up. Snakes?

Waker shook her head and stared at what was left of the kitchen. The water had crept in and filled the place. Theo's stuff bobbed about stained and ruined. The table was now a crappy raft.

How the hell did they get up there? said Theo. The dogs are on the damned roof.

Waker shivered next to Halo.

Can we take the truck? said Halo.

Nah the road's gunna be under. We'd just flip and drown.

Halo sat down drawing her legs up so she was as small as possible. Waker kept one hand on the ceiling to keep her balance.

Theo waded over to the kitchen cupboards. After rooting around he found another flashlight. Its thin light caught the oily water. The dogs barked intermittently, running up and down.

Does this happen often? asked Waker.

Theo shrugged.

This place is cursed, said Halo. See what happens, we find them things and now...

What's the time? asked Waker.

Why you got somewhere to be? asked Theo.

Just trying to work out when there be sun, is all.

Theo shrugged: Least we got a boat. He picked up a floating comic. It fell apart before he could save it. He looked sad.

But the boat ain't here, said Halo.

Marooned

The rain had stopped but the air was damp. Waker sat down next to Halo and peered out of the trailer windows. The sky was grey. Water rippled as far as the tree line. Coeur D'Alene sat like an abandoned paddle steamer. A flash flood had surged over the red dirt drowning the plantation, the pine woods and the meadow. Even the secret swampy places were overwhelmed. The sluggish brown river, that dragged itself past cotton fields and municipal dumps, had risen up to wreck revenge for its neglect. It had once been wide and proud. However, since the war it had been channelled, funnelled and tunnelled until in places it was little more than a deep stream cringing its way to the sea.

There was a loud splash outside. Waker jumped expecting Cousin Velvet. But it was Pearl. She'd launched herself off the roof into the water. She barked wagging her tail when she saw Theo. They all went outside; the trailer was beginning to stink. Theo shucked off his jeans and waded over to Pearl. Waker envied him his boy confidence. Halo snickered.

Merlyn and Dealer are on the roof, he said.

No shit Sherlock, said Waker.

How in the hell?

Cousin Velvet conjured us, said Halo.

Well least she ain't here, said Theo.

Thas cuz of Bad Blue, said Halo.

Theo waded back to the trailer fast.

What's a Bad Blue? asked Waker.

You ain't heard of Bad Blue? said Theo. He shook his head like he'd never met anyone so ignorant. His bare legs were streaked with mud. He shivered and scanned the water.

Halo sneezed. Hell we gunna die of remonia before Bad Blue.

But he'll keep Cousin Velvet away?

Uh huh, Halo laughed. The way you chunked that Nephilim, like you bin doin it every day.

Theo grinned.

Is Bad Blue an alligator? said Waker. She really needed to know. She hoped he was an adult with a gun, a working phone and maybe even a boat.

We don't name gators they ain't pets, answered Theo.

She don't know, she from British London. They only got buses and a queen.

You don't got to worry about gators, said Theo scanning the water. They're wild. They leave folks alone lest they pro-voke 'em.

Thas not what I heard, this one time... said Halo.

Waker was sure she didn't want to hear Halo's story right now. But Theo interrupted.

Cept, city fools, move to the country. He looked at Waker, then changed direction. Well any fool walk their dog at sundown 'long a river. Thas when they strike, in Florida, he finished. Florida. It don't happen here so much. Y'all hear it first, sound like a chainsaw.

Waker decided she hated The Empty. You went to bed with one problem and woke up with twelve. Her arm throbbed. She had a large soggy scab. Halo wrinkled her nose. Dealer took a leap and splash-landed in the water. He bared his teeth and paddled around outside in a circle. Merlyn kept watch from above.

Hell, least it ain't deep, said Theo. Too shallow for Bad Blue.

He stepped back down into the eddying water to prove his point. Dealer barked. Theo stopped waist deep, shivering. His shorts billowed up around him. Grey water mirrored the low grey sky. Pearl clawed her way up onto the floating picnic table. It was now a raft. Dealer joined her. He barked at the water.

Blue's an evil ole cat fish, said Theo. Big as a car or least a cow. If Bad Blue was here right now we'd be sucked down, sucked into his giant mouth, sucked to death. But like I said water's too shallow.

For now, said Halo.

Theo hurried back up to the trailer steps.

Waker began to sweat. She didn't want to believe this latest story but if it kept Velvet away, she was glad. When the morning sun finally hit the water the air got very warm. Halo found a box of Lucky Charms. She took a handful, picked out the red balloons and dropped them into the water and passed the box to Waker. The marshmallows floated away. Waker thought they'd expand, but they just floated. What if they attracted snakes? However, she was too hungry to care. The Lucky Charms were sweet and malty. The marshmallows were dry and tasted purple. They finished the box. The Charms made Waker even more hungry. And she had to find something to drink.

Things be floatin this way, said Halo, nodding towards the meadow.

The dogs began to growl curling their lips. The water lapped garbage bags and rusty cans towards them. But there was something else in the water. Waker could see lumps and jars. She felt dizzy and shivery despite the warm heavy air. The Charms roiled around her growly stomach. Her mouth was so dry her tongue stuck to her teeth.

That ain't what I think it is? said Theo.

Halo began to mutter under her breath. Waker hoped it was a prayer. Dealer headed back to the steps.

Maybe it's just debris? said Waker, thinking now would be a very good time to go back inside and find a drink.

Yeah, said Halo. Maybe it's just...

Theo yelled and jumped. The dogs barked.

What we yelling at? yelled Halo.

Theo pointed. One of the jars had reached the step. It bumped against the wet wood. Dealer pushed his nose towards it. Theo pulled him back by his collar. Storm debris swirled around the dark lump.

Go'way, stamped Halo. But the jar just bobbed up and down.

Theo pulled Dealer away to get a better look. Halo shot back into the trailer to return with Theo's fishing net.

What you gunna do with that? asked Theo.

Just see... Halo leaned forward and scooped it up. She pulled it towards the top step. Pearl watched from the picnic table. Merlyn leaned over above their heads, whining. Dealer butted his head in and sniffed. Halo looked at Waker. She wasn't sure what to do next. Two more bobbed nearby, puffy faces pressed against the glass. Merlyn barked. Dealer joined in. Pearl's fur stood up on the back of her neck.

Least they dead, said Halo. She dropped the fishing net.

Holy crap, said Theo.

Cousin Velvet's gunna want 'em back... croaked Waker, her face slick with sweat.

Warm Co-cola

They were all sitting on the kitchen table, drinking warm co-cola. It was that or beer because the tap water was running brown. The co-cola made Waker feel less sweaty and settled her stomach. But it was too warm to cool her down. She was running a fever. She was worried when she picked up the Nephilim she'd somehow caught something, some old time disease that doctors had forgotten how to cure. She uncrossed her legs and dipped her feet in the flood water. It helped a little. But she had to watch out for snakes and Nephilim. She pulled her feet back onto the table top.

Waker and Halo had swapped their wet jeans for Waker's tatty summer shorts. Merlyn had left the roof. She potted about with Pearl, trying to find somewhere dry to settle. Dealer splashed about outside like he was on a dog holiday.

Least we gotta early warning system, said Halo, taking a big swig of warm co-cola and nodding her head in Dealer's direction.

Waker and Theo nodded. No one wanted to be fish food. The jars clinked against one another outside.

I think we need to take them back, blurted Waker. She was thinking of their little dead faces. They'd reminded her of her dead twin. She almost never thought about her; though she guessed her mom did. Was that what her twin sister had looked like? What if the hospital kept her in a jar?

Say what? said Halo, glaring at Waker.

We could just drop them off on the porch.

Halo leaned forward and held her hand on Waker's clammy forehead.

Theo shuddered. No one spoke. Flies buzzed over the floating garbage.

So Velvet doesn't come over here, *tonight*.

Fever Gal gotta point, said Halo. Cousin Velvet caterwauling over one little 'un. Jes think what'll happen over the whole damn fambly.

The whole fambly? Y'all think they all floated this way? said Theo.

Waker and Halo nodded.

Where's the boat? asked Waker.

On the river, said Theo.

How you gunna get there? asked Halo.

Hell, I ain't gunna get there, said Theo.

Well someone need to stay here to collect 'em....

Waker nodded. She didn't want to sit there with the trailer door flooded open and wait for Velvet to return in the dark, very mad. She knew as well as anyone things that hadn't been properly buried had a habit of turning Plat-eye. But in London it was a story. Out in The Empty the shit was real.

Despite the shorts Waker felt like she was wearing Halo's blanket. The sun on the water was blinding. There was no way they could wade about in it when they couldn't even see straight. Theo had wandered about trying to save things but now he'd given up, defeated. Waker's legs were cramping. Mosquito minutes dragged by. Something floated into the trailer. It was a bundle of soggy bandages.

I think it's a Nephilim, said Theo, prodding it with spoon. Before it bobbed away he scooped it up and dumped it on the table. He looked at Waker daring her to poke it. There was nothing else to do and Waker was bored and stiff. Suddenly she'd do almost anything

to fill up the empty time. And it was like some sort of horror movie Christmas present. So together they began pry away the stained bandages, using the spoons like surgical instruments. Halo leaned over.

Yuck, she said, before splashing to the bathroom.

It's like it's been mummified or something, said Waker.

Wait for me, yelled Halo. The smell of diarrhoea filled the trailer fighting with the ripe garbage. Waker pretended not to notice but she crossed her fingers and hoped it didn't happen to her.

I've seen mummies at the British Museum, wrapped up.

Theo paused with his spoon. They don't unwrap 'em?

Some but mostly they do X-rays to see who's inside, Waker shrugged.

And cats, they mummified cats, added Halo, sloshing back.

Thas some messed up shit, muttered Theo.

Waker bent down and peeled off the last layer. It was another Nephilim baby. It had no mouth. No mouth at all. Halo gagged. Waker dropped her spoon. Theo tried to cover it back up with its rancid rags.

Where she get 'em from? said Theo.

Waker didn't care. They just needed to get them back somehow, before it got dark.

Maybe, all 'em shut down clinics on the highway? said Halo, sneezing.

H.A.S.L.? said Theo. Yeah, I bet they did mutant experiments. Thas why they closed. Or maybe a cover up cuz of the Nephilim powers?

Or they killed them, said Waker.

Zackly. Back in the day if baby was twis'up... or even a punkinskin...

D'you think any of the Nephilim ever got to grow up? said Waker. It doesn't look like they had the chance. But why did Cousin Velvet collect them?

Dunno, said Halo, but now we got our own collection.

They all looked outside. More jars bobbed up and down, the harsh sun warming the contents within.

We bess be doing something before they spoil, said Halo.

Before Velvet comes back, said Waker.

Before they swim back to life, said Theo.

They stared at the mouthless baby on the table.

Collecting Nephilim

The storm clouds returned. It didn't rain and it didn't get any cooler. No one wanted to sit on the table with the Nephilim so they ended up sat on the bunks. The dogs splashed about outside. Theo watched his comic collection disintegrate. Halo hummed to herself and Waker fell asleep. She woke up to a loud scrunching sound. Halo was eating her way through a box of crackers. She thrust it at Waker. Waker took one and licked at the salt.

Theo was now outside. The water had receded by about three feet, leaving muddy swirls across the floor. There was a very bad smell. Waker and Halo hurried outside. The picnic table was no longer floating. The flood water was now thigh deep. It shimmered in the late afternoon sun. Theo sloshed about loading up the table with jars. Pearl followed him. Merlyn sat on the wet step keeping an eye on the water. Dealer balanced on an Adirondack woofing encouragement. Waker looked at the dirty white sky.

Guess we marooned, said Halo, looking towards Coeur D'Alene.

Theo continued to collect the jars, his shoulders hunched. He rubbed his face with his grubby T-shirt. He looked tired and sad. Waker remembered his room or what was left of it. And now here he was trying to fix the Nephilim situation. She wanted to stay on the steps with Halo. But she couldn't leave Theo to work alone. She eased herself into the water, crossing her fingers that Merlyn and Pearl would scare off any snakes and the catfish.

Y'all need to make a lot of noise, he said, keep the gators away.

Waker hadn't considered gators. She lunged back towards the steps, slipped and went down under the murky water. She thrashed her way back to the surface and spat out the foul tasting soup.

Hey, white girl this ain't no pool, said Halo. Y'all just stomp and I'll keep watch.

Soon the table was piled high. And it wasn't all jars. There were waterlogged bundles, some unravelled. Waker caught sight of little hands and feet and a paw. She picked them up very quickly. The less she touched them the better. Now and again, they'd slip and slide and she caught a squashed head. Flies covered the wet rags. Pearl kept her distance. Halo shouted advice and directions. She assembled a pile of plates that she threw into the water when she thought she saw a snake. Waker kept going. Her arms burned. Debris bobbed up and down against her belly.

I made lunch, shouted Halo.

Waker stopped. The buzzing flies and rotten smell was background noise now. They were almost used to it and they were hungry. Halo had laid the table with almost everything from the cupboards. There was another battered box of crackers and some sort of cheese in a tube. She'd lined up the last of the co-cola.

We need a plan, said Halo, *before it gets dark.*

They looked at the laden picnic table and thought on Cousin Velvet's wailing. Waker rubbed her hands on her damp T-shirt. Her arm didn't hurt but the scab was seeping and her head felt too hot.

Well we could just take the babies back, said Waker. They all stared out across the muddy water to Coeur D'Alene. The windows looked very dark. No one wanted to wade across the meadow. If something under the water didn't get them, something in the house

might. And there was nothing to protect them from Cousin Velvet's rage. No one spoke. They munched on crackers swashed down with warm co-cola, listening to the flies. Theo tried the cheese and gagged. Waker decided if she sat outside on the wet steps she might cool down. But as she left the kitchen she saw something horrible. The Nephilim were now covered in millions of flies. They surged over the tiny carcasses in waves.

Yuck, we need to do something, *fast*.

Halo and Theo leaned over her shoulder. Now it was Halo's turn to gag. Theo hurried back into the kitchen and after some frantic searching found a roll of garbage bags. He brandished them above his head and headed towards the Nephilim pile. Waker and Halo had to help. They spent more daylight shoving the babies into the bin bags and waving away the flies. Finally, they had seven bags. Theo had a brainwave and blew into a bag before he twisted up the top.

This'll float, he said. And I know where we can take 'em.

Long as it's far away from here, said Halo.

Waker nodded but let Theo blow into the other six bags. She wasn't putting her face anywhere near those things. Many of the bundles were still crawling with flies.

Okay the boat ain't far, said Theo. We'll float 'em to the boat, then row over and dump 'em back on the porch for Cousin Velvet. Be safer than wading across the meadow. Too many flooded snake holes between there and here.

Then we row into town? asked Waker.

Too far, said Halo, slapping away a mosquito.

What about Bad Blue?

Yeah, said Halo turning to Theo. What about all them things out there? Halo pointed towards the trees behind the trailer. Waker assumed this was where the boat was.

Look it ain't that far. I can take the gun, 'long as it don't get wet, said Theo.

Halo folded her arms and frowned.

Well you got a better plan, I'm listening, shouted Theo.

Pearl scampered in looking worried. Merlyn followed.

Halo shrugged.

Waker liked the boat plan; maybe they could paddle to the highway and flag down some help? We've got the dogs and the gun, she said. And some plates...

Plates? said Theo.

For chunking at trubble, said Halo.

Of course why didn't I think of that? Theo rubbed Pearl's head. She leaned up and licked his face. He smiled. He'd lost all of his stuff but he still had Pearl, Merlyn and dumb Dealer. However, they discovered they couldn't float the bags, tote the gun and haul the anti-snake plates. They left the plates behind. The dogs would need to be their gator/catfish/snake alarm system. The dogs didn't look happy but they followed Theo's command. Pearl paddled ahead. Merlyn behind and Dealer took their flank. He looked worried but at least he was between Waker and whatever might be under the water.

They began to wade into the trees behind the trailer. The water was dark, shaded by pines and live oak. It was slow going. The bags were awkward. They kept bumping Waker's chest. Her fingers got trapped and squeezed between the clanking jars. That hurt. And the bags fizzed with flies. Theo knew the path but their sneakers sucked at their feet, slowing them down. They needed to move faster. Things from the deep dark parts of the river were

now loose to glide around them. Waker scanned the water trying to see through the swirling dirt. And not wanting to at the same time. They had to be noisy. So Halo and Theo began to chant. Waker joined in: Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, CREEK, Catawba, Catawba, Chickasaw, CREEK. Maybe the first ones would protect them?

Under the trees the warm air was thick and foul. Clouds of mosquitoes bombarded them. Waker jumped twice scaring Dealer. She expected a gator but it was only rotten timber and slippery polythene. Now and again they fell into exhausted silence. It was further than they'd thought.

Does noise scare catfish? asked Waker.

Nah, said Theo. He ain't no fool.

A bird flapped above them. Then Waker heard another noise. Like a motor.

She stopped. Is that a boat?

Theo and Halo stopped. Pearl and Merlyn pricked up their ears. Dealer bared his teeth and growled.

That ain't no boat, said Theo. Run.

They began to run, fighting their way through the flood water, stumbling and sliding, banging themselves on the jars, bobbing around in the bags.

There, Theo yelled.

Dealer barked and tried to scramble up on Halo's bag. She pushed him off. His back paw scraped her face. Dealer snarled. Merlyn and Pearl stuck to their positions growling. There was a small rowboat ahead, tied to a submerged jetty. Theo lunged to catch its bow. He hauled himself in. Then he grabbed Waker's arm, and hauled her up. They both yanked Halo so hard they almost dislocated her arms. Dealer joined them helter skelter. Pearl and

Merlyn waited for them to hoist up the bags, before they clawed their way on board. Waker gripped the boat, gagging for breath. Merlyn was bleeding from a scrape on her side. Pearl balanced on the gunwale reading the water. The sound had stopped. Theo swivelled around watching, holding the gun across his knees. Halo and Waker picked up the oars with shaking hands. Waker expected a gator to leap out of the water and bite off a chunk of the boat. She got ready to batter anything that breached the sides. But nothing happened. The dogs relaxed. It had gone, *for now*.

I don't know about you bitches, said Halo, but I ain't never going in the water again.

Boat

The rowboat strained against its frayed tether. After all the running and splashing they all settled in an exhausted heap. Even the dogs looked beaten. Something was sticking into Waker's side but she was too tired to care. Her head was still hot but there was a faint breeze across the river. Or where the river had been; the flood had engulfed the Noonday River, feeding its swift current with broken trees, fertilizer sacks and a dead pig. They watched the bloated carcass float past; its short legs sticking up, like it was waving at them. All Waker could hear were mosquitoes. The rowboat rocked in the current. The smell of mud and something old filled their noses.

Shouldn't we row back? asked Waker.

And shouldn't we be making some sort of ruckus? added Halo.

It was Theo's boat, and plan, so he needed to tell them what to do or at least what came next.

Theo shook his head: there's gators about but they don't come near the jetty, bess stay put. He leaned over the side and checked the water. Should be O.K here, he muttered to himself.

You mean to tell me we stuck here? demanded Halo. Waiting for a gator 'tack?

Theo sighed. Look they leave the boat alone so we'll be fine. Jess wait and see...

Waker didn't think this was any kind of plan. They were marooned with no food and nothing to drink. She was very thirsty. It was going to be a long hot afternoon.

I swaytogawd, Halo muttered. Totin dead ting all over the county and now settin here waiting to be gator food. She rubbed her scratched face and scowled at Dealer. Theo ignored her and watched the dogs watching the water. Pearl stood at one end of the boat,

Merlyn at the other. Dealer perched in the middle on their bumpy cargo. Waker wasn't sure if they'd sat there for half an hour or three. At first they were in some tree shade but when the sun moved, they were being cooked.

Waker examined her splinter wound. The scab had gone leaving a spit bubble of pus.

Don't look good, said Halo, shaking her head. You gunna need some antibiotic fo sho.

Waker was too tired to say no shit Sherlock.

No shit, said Theo.

Halo rooted around in her pocket and pulled out a black ribbon, like the ones Waker had seen dangling from the trees the day she'd arrived. She tied it around Waker's wrist.

Hoodoo's all we got for now, said Halo, cutting her eyes at Theo.

Theo continued to scan the water, shielding his eyes with his hand. There was a loud splash. Pearl put her head over the side and growled. Merlyn and Dealer barked. Waker tried to look in every direction at the same time.

We need to leave, whispered Halo.

We caint, Theo pointed.

The jetty was no longer under water. The floodwater around them was moving like a tide. The rowboat was sucked out into the swift current and the jetty began creak.

Sluices bin opened, hissed Theo. The dogs braced themselves.

Row, shouted Halo, her eyes wide. She dropped her oar over the side and tried to hold the boat steady by pushing against the tide. Waker copied Halo's movements as best she could. But the current was too strong.

It's too fast, we just get washed down stream, over the weir, shouted Theo. They pulled the oars back in and waited holding their breath watching the jetty. Would it hold?

They needed it to hold. It was like someone had pulled out a giant plug. The boat rocked. Waker felt sea-sick.

We can't just sit here, said Waker. What if Velvet comes back for her collection?

Yeah, said Halo. She be back fo sho. And while we on the subject jess why your crazy-ass Cousin bin collecting?

She your Cousin too, shouted Theo.

Waker was too worried by the swift current to join in. She could feel the little boat pulling to break free. While the river was running away from them under the boat a weird wave was heading towards them. The dogs began to growl.

Waker tugged at Theo's jeans, what's that?

Theo didn't notice at first he was too busy yelling at Halo.

Guys, guys, shouted Waker. WHAT'S THAT?

What? shouted Halo, turning to follow Waker's pointed finger.

Something was heading towards them and it was big. The water rose around a bloated back. A blue fin fanned out above the swell.

Bad Blue, said Theo. IT'S BAD BLUE, HANG ON.

Dealer lost it, barking and jumping about. Theo grabbed his collar to stop him going over the side. Pearl bared her teeth and lowered her head. Merlyn waited. The thing hit the side of boat. They lurched and spun but they didn't capsize.

Waker and Halo gripped the gunwale. Theo raised the shotgun slowly and squinted at the river. Halo yanked up her oar gripping it with both hands. The dogs went silent. Waker scrabbled for the other oar. She too needed a weapon. Theo sat tight. Waker shook

but she held her oar ready to jab. Halo muttered under her breath. Pearl moved from one side of the boat to the other, snarling.

We need to git gone, hissed Halo.

There was another splash beyond the boat. Waker watched the river, fast and slick, swollen with flood water. Whatever it was had headed back to the Noonday, for now. They waited and waited some more. Theo eventually broke the stultifying silence.

Reckon it'll be too shallow for Bad Blue under the trees, help me pull her in.

They all caught the painter and began to pull themselves away from the river into the shallows back beside the jetty. It was hard work, sometimes their hands slipped or the dogs got in the way and they had to start again. Their hands were raw. Waker disliked leaning over the Nephilim sacks. She could smell them. Their damp rotten smell seeped into her clothes and skin. Theo took the slack and looped the rope around one of the jetty posts. He then reassessed the water.

Looks shallow but water's moving fast. Whatever y'all do don't fall down.

Waker and Halo leaned over the side with the dogs. If they fell they'd be swept back into the river and Bad Blue.

Bess take an oar jest in case, said Theo, clambering over the side, followed by Pearl.

We gunna paddle it to death? said Halo.

Theo braced himself as the flood water boiled around his legs. He shrugged.

You got a better plan? He shouted.

Naw, said Halo, just checkin you ain't gone into some fool shock.

Theo glared at Waker. I don't have a plan either, she squeaked.

Well less be fast then, sighed Theo. Waker got the impression he'd rather be dealing with boys. Theo whistled the dogs over the side.

Merlyn and Dealer followed Pearl. The dogs struggled but began to head under the trees. Waker and Halo looked at one another, then slowly climbed over the side. They didn't want to get left behind. Waker grabbed her oar, ready to impale anything in the brown swirling tide. They moved fast because they didn't have the Nephilim to slow them down and no one was confident about oaring a gator to death.

It was a long short walk back. They were walking against the current and the mud gummed up their feet. Halo slipped and nearly fell twice. But the water receded fast. When they reached the trailer all that was left of the flash flood was giant puddles and bashed about branches. They shot up the steps and surveyed The Empty. The humid air smelt bad. Waker sat down still holding the oar; she was too tired and defeated to get back up again. Her mind was as blank as the whitening sky. Halo tapped her on the shoulder and passed her a box of stale crackers. Waker scraped them out. She was starving.

You a real Southerner now, said Halo.

Waker was too exhausted to reply. And she was worried about Cousin Velvet. But at least they had a door to shut and a gun. Maybe they could leave a message for Velvet telling her where to find the Nephilim.

Water be gone tomorrow, said Halo.

Waker chewed another cracker. She needed some clean water to drink fast or she was going start drinking puddles like Dealer. Theo banged about inside. Halo sat down

beside Waker. Time felt like it had stopped. Maybe if they didn't move nothing would ever happen again. It wouldn't get dark and Velvet wouldn't come back.

Thas gunna go, said Halo, scowling at the waterlogged meadow and the pine forest beyond.

What d'you mean? asked Waker.

We the last, everyone left already, shrugged Halo. She stared hard at Waker as if it was her fault. Tree haints'll stay, but thas all.

Halo sighed and got up. Waker stared at Coeur D'Alene. The old house looked mean in the glaring light. Waker was scared she would see a face in one of the dark windows. And she didn't like the sound of tree haints. Was that something else she had to worry about? She hurried after Halo into the trailer taking the oar weapon with her. Theo was feeding the dogs. They gobbled their food like they hadn't eaten in weeks. The tap gushed brown water into the sink. Halo studied it waiting for it to run clear.

Tole her, it's all gunna go, said Halo, lining up three highballs.

Theo dumped the dog food under the sink. He looked sad.

Halo filled the glasses and passed them around. They all gulped in silence and then helped themselves to a refill.

Uh huh, agreed Theo. S'all gunna go, new road and big-ass shopping mall... maybe. He sold it... Theo shrugged.

Halo surprised them both by laughing. She sprayed water across the muddy floor.

Thas your college fund bwoy, said Halo, imitating Clay. 'Least we get to leave and go all the way to Atlanta or... Halo cast around for somewhere even further away. Or Stone Mountain.

Ain't no college in Stone Mountain, said Theo. 'Sides... he trailed off and looked around at what was left of his wrecked home.

Waker rubbed her face. She felt sad and tired. She was dirty and she smelt bad. Theo slid down the kitchen wall and sat down. They watched the dogs settle. Waker thought this selling might be a good thing: regular shops and regular people, cars and phones and no Empty. The Empty would be full of real people doing and eating and driving. The awful gap or hole in time and space, that wasn't a real place would be filled in. The Hoodoo, the Nephilim, Cousin Velvet and Bad Blue would be buried, paved over, drowned beneath muzak and fast food. Waker wasn't sure about the gators. They'd continue to menace shoppers at the edge of the parking lot, probably.

'Speck they'll call it some fancy-ass name: beau meadow or some shit, said Theo.

Slave Song, said Waker, without thinking. She bit her lip.

Halo laughed: We could make a sign. Welcome to Slave Song a... she paused and thought. A *her-it-tage* shopping mall.

An *au-then-tic* shopping experience with a McDonald's... said Waker. She wanted to reassure herself that such places still existed somewhere in the world out there, beyond The Empty.

Chain gang, said Halo.

Dressed up as old time...

Blackface, finished Halo.

They laughed even though it wasn't funny, but it was.

My daddy done the deed, said Halo, frowning.

Waker looked at her.

Yeah, trust old Clay to smell an easy hand.

Theo had drawn his legs up with his head resting on his knees, shaking. Waker and Halo couldn't see his face but they both knew he was crying.

You better than this, said Halo. She touched Theo's arm. He shrugged. Pearl squeezed in between them.

I ain't leavin, said Theo.

No, said Halo. I ain't leavin.

Neither am I, said Waker, trying to sound like she meant it. College in Atlanta sounded miles better than this place but for Theo it was home. And Stone Mountain just sounded cold.

Sides we all gunna die of rotten crackers, said Halo.

More like eatin' dog food, said Theo.

Hell, that ain't difficult. One time my daddy Clay got so mad he made me eat a whole can of dog food and we ain't even got a dog.

Theo wiped his nose hard with the back of his hand and swore under his breath. Waker realised this wasn't a tall tale.

Got my own back, said Halo, raising her eyebrows. I was sick all over my granddaddy's porch. She forced a chuckle. Hell, I thought Clay's daddy gunna kill us both.

Mr Nice Guy

The days that followed blurred together like grey glue. Waker lost track of time. She ruminated on The Empty. The land was dry and empty again, just grass and more grass. Then the woods; woods that went on for weeks. Insects filled the heavy air with their noise bugs, crickets, flies and more flies. Once a day the weather such as it was stirred up a storm. The grass threw itself about like an angry sea. And there was something else, a presence of absence. It was so thick it felt solid. It pressed down on the empty space until it was hard to breath. In the past, in geological time, there'd been a sea here, then a warm sea and later still a shallow sea. Shark teeth fossils and the thin outline of a once giant squid had been uncovered across the tidal flats according to Waker's dad. Thinking on all this made her miss him even more. Who would read to her now? Who would tell her cool stuff? She watched the woods; wiping away her snotty tears. They too had their own atmosphere: gloomy and dark like the shadowy water beneath seaweed. Such was The Empty with its weird fullness. It pushed anything living (above the size of a bug) out; scalding to death the breathing creatures in the noonday sun.

The flash flood boiled dry, the dirt baked. The Empty was strewn with debris from someplace else where people lived and worked to buy shit they didn't need: mangled lawn chairs, plastic toys, a fancy bedframe and a cracked hot tub. At first it was good to feel dry and hot. They roamed about exploring the mud-caked landscape, trying to figure out what they'd found and was it worth anything? Dead chickens, beer cans and two busted caskets, that had been emptied, littered the meadow. Theo argued with them about dragging the caskets back. It's good wood, he'd insisted. Worth something. Waker and Halo didn't fancy

that. Shredded stained silk filled the insides with who knew what fermenting diseases. Halo found what looked like a gold watch but they couldn't be sure. And Waker found what Theo called a chifforobe. The owner had scratched his initials into the door alongside a big Nazi swastika. Waker hoped he didn't turn up looking for his furniture. However, they hauled the drawers back to add to their kindling pile.

Then they were listless and lethargic. They got sun burnt. There were too many flies and mosquitos. They had enough of crackers and popcorn. The Oreos ran out. Waker wanted proper food on a clean plate. She had a craving for fat cold tomatoes with chunks of Cheddar cheese on top. She didn't even like cheese. Theo said the bridge was still shut but how he knew this Waker didn't know and was too tired to ask. They all had diarrhoea. The dogs lolled about, waiting. Halo hummed and stared at the watch as if it could tell her something about time.

One morning they'd discovered what looked like muddy or bloody handprints all the along the side of the trailer. So Waker made a large sign, using some dry cardboard and the only pen that hadn't been ruined in the flood to tell Cousin Velvet that her babies, (the Nephilim Waker added in parenthesis, just to be very clear) were safe in the boat at the jetty. Waker propped it up in the trailer window hoping if Velvet did come roaming (and wailing) she'd then head off towards the river and not return, ever. Waker felt bad about this as Velvet was kin, but she was also deranged. Who knew what else she was capable of?

Then everything thing changed the day the dogs sat up and barked. A large 4-by-4 headed slowly towards them. The big car stopped now and again while the driver decided whether to drive over the storm debris or skirt around.

Someone's coming, Waker shouted, clattering down the steps. Theo and Halo joined her, overtaken by Pearl. Sun flashed across the tinted windshield.

Clay, said Halo. She scowled down the track. Waker felt like she'd stepped into the shade. She shivered. Time stretched out, like a shallow tide. The 4-by-4 moved in slow motion. Waker had a bad feeling at the bottom of her stomach. Halo cut her eyes and sat down on the trailer steps. She clicked her fingers. Merlyn bounded up the steps and settled down beside her. Dealer lit out across the yard to bark at the unwanted. Pearl waited at Theo's side, her tongue drooping against the heat. Waker stood with her hands on her hips. It made her feel bigger, something her dad had taught her. But she needed a dog at her side too. Theo and Halo weren't jumping up and down to be rescued by Clay. Waker remembered the car journey from the airport. Okay she didn't really like Clay because he made a move on her Mom. But surely he could take them into town and buy them food. Maybe they'd even get to stay in the real house he'd mentioned. Then she remembered Halo's dog food story.

Theo whistled. Dealer stopped. Waker could tell Dealer wanted to launch himself at the car but thought better of it and returned to the yard. He growled, stepping close to Waker. She felt elated for a moment. In the past she'd been shit scared of dogs but not anymore. Let them bark and growl and annoy the hell out of the likes of Clay. Bring it on.

Quit it, said Theo, jerking his head.

Dealer stopped and lowered his head. Waker wanted to pat his back. A bead of sweat ran down her bare leg, trickling into her sneaker. Waker crossed her fingers; maybe he'd brought her mom back. But Clay was alone. He leaned his head out of the car window and smiled. He looked exactly like his realtor poster, good looking and clean, like freshly

squeezed orange juice. He nodded at Theo and his mouth grinned at Waker and Halo. The car rolled to a stop. The door opened, blinding sunlight flashed, searing Waker's eyes. She blinked and in that instant Clay was bounding towards them.

Permission to come aboard, suh? He smirked. I'm the rescue mission.

Waker's shoulders dropped. She pushed her hands into her pockets. Maybe they'd get a lift into town and Waker could phone her mom? Clay could buy them ice cream and then leave them alone? But her stomach told her something else, something bad. She remembered the scene at the cider stand. Theo nodded and folded his arms. Pearl put her tongue away and stared at Clay. He frowned, considering his next move. He glanced over towards Halo, ignoring Waker. Waker was suddenly conscious of how grubby and smelly she was.

Time to come on home, punkin, he said. Boy, you guys need a *bath*. He shook his head, smiling but only with his big mouth.

Halo snorted and turned her face towards Coeur D'Alene. Clay followed her gaze and whistled.

Been a long time since I drove down this far. No wonder you kids don't wanna leave... a real playground you got here. Good hunting too..., he nodded as if he was closing a sale.

Coeur D'Alene didn't look like a kids' playground, more like a death trap, thought Waker. But now Clay's voice was quiet and slow. He looked directly at Waker. Her legs began to shake.

Miss Waker, Waker? I get that right little lady? He didn't wait for Waker to reply.

I'd like to *a*-pologize. He made the end of the word sound like a big bunch of letters on a billboard. He took a step towards Waker holding out a big hand. Waker's hand moved without her even deciding where it was going. Clay's hand shake was strong. He held on. Then he began to squeeze hard. Waker felt tears prickle in her eyes.

Clay continued: I'd like to *a*-pologize for that little bitch. She just like her mama. And you just like yo mama too.

Time slowed to a stop. Clay was so close Waker's nose and mouth filled with his expensive aftershave. She bit her lip. The iron taste of blood covered her tongue. Waker heard the wind in the grass and a low growl. Dealer sprang up scaring them both. They leapt apart. Dealer snarled. Clay backed away towards his car. Theo whistled. Dealer stood down. Waker pressed her hands together to stop them shaking. Tears ran down her greasy face. She could still feel Clay's vice like grip around her bruised fingers.

I ain't your punkin'skin, shouted Halo, standing up on the steps.

Clay eyed Dealer and Halo. He licked his lips. Then he strode past Waker and caught Halo by the shoulder. Dealer sprang after Clay, barking and nipping at Clay's heels. Halo was blocked in by Clay, trapped against the trailer door. But she had Merlyn for insurance.

The dog ruckus grew. Theo didn't call the dogs to order. Dealer bit into Clay's chinos and tried to pull him away from the trailer. Merlyn barked at Clay's sweating face. Clay kicked Dealer behind him while tightening his grip on Halo's shoulder. She squirmed but was rammed against the wooden hand-rail.

Jeez, Punkin, all this fuss, Clay was trying to keep his tone even but it was slipping. Waker wanted to fight Clay or distract him. But she'd be in for a good hiding. Clay was now kicking at both dogs. He wrenched Halo down the steps striding past Merlyn and Dealer.

Waker turned tail and scurried out of his path. There was a rusty screwdriver congealed in the dirt. She grabbed it. She knew what to do. By the time Waker reached the back of the car, Clay was at the car door. He was dragging Halo by her thick hair. She was yelling and crying and twisting to escape. Waker felt sick. All pretence at Mr Nice Guy was long gone.

STOP, she yelled.

Waker waved the screwdriver. The dogs were silent.

Leave her alone, shouted Waker. Or I'll key your car.

Clay frowned like he didn't understand Waker. Maybe Americans didn't say key?

Waker waved the screwdriver and stabbed it down on the trunk. There was a bang and a small dent.

You little bitch, spat Clay.

Waker raised the screwdriver then hammered it down again and again. She was so angry she couldn't stop herself. The dents deepened, the paint cracked. Waker leaned over and went for the window. The screwdriver made a high-pitched scrapping sound.

When I've dealt with this bad mout, I'm gunna come A-round there and lick you from here to Atlanta.

Waker wanted to hurtle off, she only had the car between her and Clay. But it was as if her arms had taken on a life of their own. They scraped and scored and chiselled at the shiny silver surface. She was burning angry.

Clay lunged pulling Halo with him.

Waker kept hammering using both hands for impact. Somehow she knew how to do this. Clay roared and made to grab her again. Then he stopped moving. He stood very still

watching something Waker couldn't see. Halo continued to twist and Waker continued to pound. Her hands and arms hurt. Then she saw what Clay saw.

Theo was standing in the middle of the yard with his shotgun. That was why the dogs went silent. They were waiting. Theo raised the shotgun to his shoulder and squinted.

Jeez boy, this sure is *the day*... He was breathing hard, out of breath.

Theo didn't answer. Waker held the screwdriver out in front of her like a knife, ready to jab. Clay shrugged. Halo lunged for freedom but Clay yanked her back. He bent down and muttered something ugly in her ear.

You fixin to shoot us all boy?

Theo didn't move, his jaw set, his eyes blank.

No just you, said Waker, for your clar-ifi-cation. She was more angry than afraid now.

Halo swiped at Clay's face scratching him across the cheek. She pulled free and barrelled into Waker, almost knocking her down. Waker put an arm around Halo's shoulders and re-pointed the screwdriver at Clay.

Clay rubbed his cheek. A thin line of blood bubbled up.

Okay y'all won. I'll just go on and *leave*. He held up his hands in mock surrender.

Theo didn't move. Pearl shook herself. Clay took a step towards the car door. But he changed his mind. He moved fast. He knocked Waker down. She lost the screwdriver. He grabbed Halo's wrist and dragged her back towards the car door. Merlyn leapt at Clay. But he yanked the door open and threw Halo screaming and clawing inside. He shoved her across and pushed in beside her, punching at Merlyn. Dealer went wild trying to get in some bites. Clay rammmed the car into reverse, the car door swinging. Merlyn was knocked into the air.

Waker scrambled up just in time up to jump sideways. She bashed her head on the gate post. The pain stunned her, taking her out of the melee and into a starry sick zone. But she turned fast expecting to be smashed by the car's big-ass bumper. However, the car was lurching backwards towards the track. Halo was scrabbling to open the passenger door. Merlyn staggered after Dealer who thought he could gnaw his way through the hood.

Theo raised the shot gun but it was useless with Halo and the dogs in the way. Waker slid down the gate post, her legs like rubber bands. The car zig-zagged like a drunk. Then Halo tumbled out of the car hitting the track hard. Theo shouted at Merlyn and Dealer to get out the way, his arms trembling under the weight of the gun. Then there was a thump and a yelp. Clay had hit something.

Halo stumbled away from the track and fell down. She was dusty and dazed. Clay braked hard. Everything stopped. Waker heard a bird call. Then Clay got out slowly, shaking and straightened up.

Goddamn it, he said gripping the car door.

Dealer barred his way growling. The car engine hummed, its air conditioned luxury bled into The Empty.

Clay searched for Halo, his white face pale, his mouth wobbling. He thought he'd run her over. She got up and limped towards Waker. Theo raised his shotgun. Clay's face tightened. He reached quick-fast into the car. Waker worried: did he have a car gun? But Theo knelt down and took aim. Waker could only stare. Clay was thrashing about inside the car, looking for God knows what. Dealer took his chance and went for Clay's unguarded

back. Standing on his hind legs he bit him. Clay yelled and kicked but decided he was better off inside the car with the door slammed shut.

Theo whistled. Dealer backed off but stayed to block Clay's path. Theo fired. Waker covered her ears too late. They hurt, the shot was too loud and too close. Theo took out a headlamp. Clay sat shaking inside his car. He muttered and nodded to himself as if he was assessing something. Then his car jumped forward and made a U-turn. It fish-tailed in the dirt, and sped off down the track.

Merlyn and Dealer began to howl. Waker got up, her ears ringing. Clay's car disappeared into the trees. Halo caught Waker's hand.

Pearl, she mouthed.

Now the car had gone Waker could see Pearl lying in the churned up dirt. She was on her side, trying to raise her head. Where Pearl's body should have been was a bloody tyre track. Theo dropped to his knees. Tears ran down his dirty face. He stroked Pearl's head. Then Waker couldn't see for crying.

Son of a bitch, said Theo, so soft it sounded like a prayer.

Waker and Halo instinctively moved to shade Pearl and Theo from the relentless sun. It was all they could do. Be kind, there was nothing else left. Draw off some of the sun's fury. Pearl's guts were all churned up with red Georgia clay.

Dealer and Merlyn hovered howling. Pearl tried to raise her head again.

Whad'we gunna do? sobbed Halo.

Theo just stroked Pearl's head. Flies began to crawl across her open insides. Halo stamped them away. But they just lifted and resettled, picnickers getting a better seat.

She sufferin, said Halo. Her voice rising. Waker caught her arm. Halo shook her loose. Well? Halo couldn't stand this much longer. Her face was swollen.

Theo stood up and wiped his face with his arm. He snapped the shotgun shut, business like. Waker and Halo stepped back trying to step over Pearl's insides. Dealer and Merlyn didn't move but howled louder.

Quit it, damn you, spat Theo. Thas no use.

He kicked out at the dogs. Git.

The dogs took the blows. It was awful, Theo kicking his own. He lowered the gun. His eyes were too full of tears to see straight.

Waker wanted to blurt out: could they call a vet, go for help, find a phone? But she knew there was no way to mend this mess. Theo re-set himself. Pearl put her head down and watched him, as if she was trying to fix his face in her dog brain. Another bird called across the meadow but there was no answer.

Theo put his foot on Pearl's neck, then took it away. He put the barrel gently onto her head. Pearl waited her eyes soft and large. Waker and Halo put a hand each on Theo's shoulders. The shot filled their ears and tore their hearts like paper.

River

Theo broke open the shotgun and removed the spent shells, ramming them into his back pocket. He passed the gun to Waker. It was heavy and the barrel was hot. Waker had no idea what to do next. She felt very sick. Theo peeled up what was left of his dog. Halo handed him her blanket. He wrapped Pearl up. Then he lifted her and stumbled towards the trees. Merlyn and Dealer followed. Waker and Halo looked at one another. They had to decide. Both of them wanted, no needed, to curl up in the trailer and lick their own wounds until this was all over. But watching Theo struggle alone with his grisly bundle was more than they could stand. Waker lent the empty gun against a tree and they followed the dogs.

They made a sorry procession into the woods, shouldering the oars. There were still swampy pools left from the flash flood. They glinted in the sun slanting down through the thick trees. Flies buzzed and mosquitos whirred. A woodpecker knocked somewhere above them but there was no other sound. Maybe the other birds had left? Waker concentrated on the root knotted forest floor and listened for the motor sound of a gator. Halo scanned the trees and glanced behind them. She hummed to herself and muttered now and again: studyin Cousin Velvet, she love the pinelan.

Waker wanted to say she was studyin gators but was too tired to speak. Now they had Cousin Velvet to worry about too. And they hadn't even left a note at the trailer about where in The Empty they were going, for any decent adult to find, *should* any stop by. But then who was coming? Clay? Her mom, just where the hell was she? Waker began to cry. But she kept it very quiet so the others didn't notice. She tried to think about what her dad

would tell her to do but she couldn't hear his voice anymore. He had really gone and left her.

Theo led them to the river. The Noonday was high but the boat still bobbed at the jetty with its garbage bags filled with Nephilim. Waker had almost forgotten about the Nephilim. Theo whistled. Merlyn and Dealer jumped into the boat. But Theo stood defeated as if he couldn't quite get it together to take another step. So Waker and Halo clambered down off the jetty, following the dogs' example. They balanced bracing themselves to reach up for Pearl. Theo hesitated then passed her over. They placed her gently between the Nephilim sacks. Theo got in and looked at them as he'd forgotten how to row. Halo loosened the painter and Waker squeezed herself onto the seat, taking an oar. Theo did the same. Halo sat at the stern. Dealer took the bow and Merlyn sat next to Halo scanning the swollen river.

Now they'd left the trees Waker felt a bit better; she'd imagined Cousin Velvet dangling down above them, grabbing their hair. However, they could be floating above gators and Bad Blue and what about Clay? What if he returned? Her muscles ached and stiffened. Maybe Clay was out there now, squinting down a gun aiming for her kidneys? But nothing happened, just the sound of the oars and insects. Halo was silent, too dazed to hum.

Doll Island, muttered Theo. Waker didn't know what Doll Island was but at least that was some sort of plan. Perhaps they could hide from Clay there and find a phone. Maybe there'd be a fishing shack and a cider stand with adults. Adults who would save them? They pulled on the oars until the little boat caught the current. The awful thunk, when Clay's car

hit Pearl and the Pearl shaped mess, looped around and around in Waker's mind. She shivered. Flies coated the bloody blanket. There was a smell of bad meat.

Waker wondered should they drop Pearl over the side like a burial at sea. But that was all too neat. They'd need some heavy shit so her body didn't bob up again. What if Pearl unwrapped? Dog debris floating across the river's greasy surface: bubbling spleen and livery bits, gators snapping and no one to bark them away.

After all the rain they moved fast. A small breeze cooled their arms and faces as they cleared the woods. Brown fields of dry stalks stretched away, shimmering under heat waves. Here even the insects were beaten down into silence. Waker's neck burned.

My daddy comin, mumbled Halo. He don't leggo.

Theo looked around but didn't stop rowing. Waker couldn't see anything, just tall grass and jagged weeds. The river widened. The current pulled them along. The bank was slipping further away. Clay wouldn't catch them out here surely? Theo began to pull harder, Waker tried to match his stroke but he was practiced. Blisters bubbled across her palms.

This way, said Theo, nodding to the left. Waker wanted to stop rowing and let the current take them. She wanted to put her sore hands in the cold river. Fuck gators. But gators were the least of their problems right now. The river was pulling them fast, like they were slipping downhill. Weedy meadows guarded by poisonous Yellow Jasmine and Catalpa slid past. Then there was a bright flash. There was something on the bank, Clay's car. He came at them fast. He'd been stalking them all along. The river curved, taking them towards the bank and Clay.

Merlyn and Dealer snarled. Theo and Waker pulled and pushed hard, trying to cross the current and head for the opposite bank. But they were sucked back towards Clay. He

was out of his car, yelling, waving his key fob aggressively over his shoulder, locking his car.

Ridick'lus, spat Halo.

Least he ain't got his gun, said Theo, leaning hard on the oar, trying to turn the little boat about. Waker tried to copy Theo's moves but it was too hard. She had no idea what he was going to do until he did it. And then she was two or three strokes behind. If only the river would suck them around the bend.

Here it come, hissed Theo. The dogs fell silent watching for Clay's next move, waiting on Theo's command.

Clay shucked off his shoes and lunged into the water.

Gator get you, whispered Halo, twisting her ribbons and muttering: Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek...

In three long smooth strokes he was half-way to the gunwales. The boat bumped a sandbar and stuck. Halo continued chanting. Clay's linen shirt billowed out around his chest. Waker glared at the water willing a gator to appear to pull Clay down by his chinos. She could smell his after-shave, mixed with the river's muddy breath. Theo released his oar and stood up, bracing his feet on either side of the boat's curved bottom. Merlyn and Dealer tensed. Clay reached the boat and grabbed the side.

Damn boy, this ain't the way...

The sand bar gave him traction, something to push his feet against. Halo scabbled in panic away from Clay, rocking the boat, toppling Theo into the water. His oar banged down across Waker's shoulder. Merlyn and Dealer leapt into the water after Theo, barking. Waker had to do something, but what? Halo was backed into the bow with nowhere to go.

He leered at Waker. She could smell his breath. He was mean drunk. Halo pulled up her legs ready to kick. The bloody Pearl mess seeped out across the Nephilim sacks. The dogs paddled fast around Theo trying not to be dragged away by the swift current. But it made no difference with nothing to hold onto the three of them were swept away towards a loud rushing noise.

You crazy kids, Clay yelled. His eyes were bloodshot.

Leave us alone, shouted Waker.

Thas not nice little lady, mama never teach you how to *be-have*?

Waker could smell urine. Clay stood back on the sand bar. His torso wet and rippling.

Hell it ain't even deep, he spat.

But the boat began to list away from the sand bar. Now Clay needed to hang on.

Jeez, he muttered, less confident.

The boat spun back into the current but Clay was still holding on. Waker grabbed Theo's oar and jabbed Clay hard in the face. His nose burst. Blood sprayed his face.

Bitches, roared Clay and lashing out grabbing her oar and wrenching it away.

The boat pitched downstream. Waker's head filled with Clay's screaming face. He tried to heave himself over the side but Halo leaned forward and smashed his hand with a Nephilim jar. Clay let go of the gunwale. He tried to tread water but the current was too fast, blood swirled around his swollen face. Waker waited for another attack but Clay made no move on the boat. He was watching something in the water.

Gator, said Waker, gripping Halo's wet arm.

Halo shook her head: Bad Blue.

They squeezed themselves down into the boat. A large wave caught the stern. Water washed over the sides. Clay floundered around in the choppy water. There was something behind him. It was big. Waker only saw it for a second: a giant gelatinous head with whiskers and bulging rolling eyes. Clay kicked hard but he went under. Then he was gone.

The Other Side

The boat began to twist. Things went from very bad to even worse.

Lie down. LIE DOWN, yelled Halo. She grabbed Waker by her hair and pulled her down into the boat. They were sucked under a very low bridge and into a tunnel. It was very noisy, like being inside a giant washing machine. Waker held her breath waiting to be sucked under the water and into oblivion. The boat bumped and scraped backwards, roiling water splashing over the sides. The river pounded concrete walls, smashing the little boat this way and that. Angry rushing rapids drowning them in scummy waves and noise.

LIE DOWN. LIE DOWN, shouted Halo.

She elbowed Waker across the chest, pressing her down into the Nephilim. The boat grated along the tunnel walls. Waker closed her eyes expecting her face to be skinned. A slimy smell filled her nose and mouth. She gagged. There were terrible scrapping sounds, as the little boat fought its way through. They seemed to be going down a storm drain. Waker shrieked. Halo screamed. So this was the end, drowned and splintered.

Then they were out the other side. They opened their eyes. The sun blinded them. They were too dazed to sit up so they lay squinting up at the relentless blue. The bloody Pearl smell mixed with the hot sun and the oily fumes. The current tugged them along away from the storm drain hell. Waker was soaked and shaking but she still had a face. A bark, followed by eager splashing, got them sitting up. Merlyn swam up to the boat. Her ear was torn and bleeding. They hauled her up by her collar. She was so happy she couldn't stop licking their faces.

Waker and Halo tried to spit out the bad brown taste of the muddy river, but it didn't work. The boat continued downstream, as if it had a mind of its own. They peered over the side and scanned the banks. There were more trees. They swivelled their heads looking for any sign of Theo and Dealer. Halo scowled into the water jumping back if anything moved, expecting Clay to suddenly reach up and drag her over the side. Waker twisted around, the rough boat boards rubbed her bare legs. She could see a kind of island up ahead made up of a congealed collection of snagged rubbish, rotten trees, old cables and frayed nylon rope. The river was loud again. Was there another storm drain?

Row, shouted Halo.

They both grabbed the remaining oar. Merlyn cowered low. They tried to hold the boat against the current and head to the bank. However, the current was too fast and slippery. Their pushing and pulling made no difference. The oar caught in twine and swirling plastic bags. Merlyn yelped. Waker couldn't see what was coming but it was bad.

We've gone the wrong way, yelled Halo, above the noise. Weir.

They were moving too fast in the wrong direction. They lost sight of the river banks. Stinking garbage towered above their heads: rotten fish, bad meat, and blistered rubber, washed down from trailer parks up river. Waker tried to hold her breath. Halo gagged in between yelling. Waker began to heave. The boat dipped and pitched. Waker held on. Merlyn growled. The boat scrapped along something long submerged. Then like a rollercoaster it shot up sideways. Waker was flung into the scummy, boiling Noonday. Her eyes burned, she couldn't see. She fought the water and storm debris, thrashing with everything she had left. But river dragged her down. She was pinned underwater at the base of the malevolent weir. She kicked and crawled along the dark, slimy concrete base,

pulling at anything. Her lungs compressed but she kept pulling herself until she escaped the terrible tumbling water pressure. Then, seeing stars, she pushed off the concrete, to surface gagging for air. The weir roared behind her, waiting for its next victim. Waker began to tread water. She'd taken a beating but survived. A plastic Christmas tree caked in grey slime floated past her face, but no boat.

Doll Island

Waker let the current take her past the garbage snagged by the weir. She barely had the energy to keep her head above the current. Her sneakers weighed her feet down but she couldn't shuck them off, she'd laced them too tight. The river was now wide and flat like the cotton fields beyond; its current lazy after the frantic churning water of the weir. The banks looked a long way away. All around her was brown: brown water, brown fields. The storm debris hadn't made it past the weir but what about gators and Bad Blue?

It was too quiet. She needed to get out of the water. She turned around and around trying to think about what to do. She was tired. Her legs and arms ached. Her lungs felt bruised. She tried to stare down through the murky water to see what was lurking beneath. The river kept pulling her further away from the weir, which was the one good thing she held on to. Float, just float like a log. She remembered her dad teaching her to swim. If you ever get really tired just lie on your back and float. She'd always told herself she'd do this if there were sharks too; pretend she was an old piece of driftwood. And maybe they'd be fooled and leave her alone. She stretched back in to the water and looked up at the merciless sky. Weird it was so blue and deep, heaven and she was in hell.

She drifted for so long she began to fall asleep. Her eyes rolled and her eyelids were heavy. This was dangerous. She was going to drown unless she got it together somehow. She turned over and dunked her face in the muddy river. She rubbed her eyes and began the laborious process of treading water again. She could see trees up ahead: trees in the middle of the river. It was an island. She began to swim and swim hard, swimming and swearing. She was scared the current would drag her past. She kept up the swearing until

she felt a ratty beach beneath her knees scrapping them raw. She dragged herself forward expecting gator teeth or Bad Blue's giant maw to suck her back under water. But there was just her. The hot sun made her queasy and the crickets filled her ears. She lay for a long time face down like a dead thing too weary to go on down to hell.

Then something touched her head. Waker jumped. She'd fallen asleep. A dog barked in her ear. Waker sat up only to be knocked flat by Dealer. He barked then licked her face until she struggled up and pushed him off. He shook himself spraying dirty water every which way. Waker rubbed his head and hugged him. So Dealer began to bark and lick her face all over again.

You're alive? said Waker.

Dealer did his dog smile. She looked around willing the others to appear. But sand, red dirt and thick trees was all there was to see. Until Waker spotted the boat bumping up against a rocky spur. She staggered over, her sneakers squelching and rubbing her feet, forgetting her bleeding knees.

HALO, THEO, Waker shouted, Mer-LYN.

There was no answer. Dealer ran ahead and sniffed the boat. But he didn't get too close. Waker began to hurry. What if Halo was lying in the bottom of the boat her lungs filled with water?

First aid, first aid, Waker chanted. FIRST AID.

But Halo and Pearl had disappeared. The Nephilim sacks were caught under the seats, waiting. Waker screamed and kicked the boat. This hurt her foot but she did it again. Dealer barked and then sat back and howled.

Shit, Shit, SHIT, yelled Waker, stomping around the beach.

Dealer quit howling and watched Waker. She stopped and sat down. Her legs were shaking. For a while she rubbed blood up and down her legs making a swirly pattern. The sun dried her hair stiff with mud. Dealer explored the edge of the trees. Time stopped. Waker had no idea how long she'd been here or even what day it was. She forgot to worry about gators and anyway she was too tired to move. Dealer sat down next to her. He had something in his mouth. It was an old Barbie doll with matted hair. It had a frayed black ribbon around its neck. Waker turned slowly to face the trees.

Here and there the sun poked through the branches making patches of dark and dazzle. Then Waker saw something move. There was something dangling from the nearest tree. It was another Barbie doll wrapped in tatty black ribbon. Waker stood up and began to trudge up the branch strewn beach. Dealer followed her, still carrying the first Barbie. Waker looked down at Dealer. She tugged the Barbie out of his mouth.

This is someone's garden, she explained to Dealer, holding the doll and wiping the dog drool off as best she could. Maybe there's a house behind the trees with kids and a family? And a dog? Dealer didn't look convinced. However, he went along with it all the same. Waker headed into the trees hoping to see a big house with swings and children. They'd be curious and a bit impressed with her story. The adults could help find Theo and the others. But there was no house only more trees and more dolls. On each tree someone had nailed a doll, cheap plastic baby dolls that were all damaged but in different ways. More Barbies swung in the trees higher up.

The dolls looked like they had been there a long time. Some were grey with mould spreading across their dented faces. Some had lost their eyes. A giant baby doll (almost as

big as Dealer) had lost its whole face, another doll's arms and legs stuck out as if it was trying to run away. All the Barbies had had their long silky hair hacked off. Dealer barked.

Quiet, Waker hissed. He stopped. They waited and kept very still. Waker did not want to meet the gardener. Waker and Dealer eyed the trees and the dolls. The more Waker looked the more of them she saw. She felt like they were watching her, waiting for her next move. They listened to the river lapping the edge of the island and the odd bird flapping overhead.

We need to leave, whispered Waker, slowing backing towards the beach. Dealer headed off so Waker turned and shot after him. She was running so fast she couldn't stop herself running smack bang into Halo. She knocked Halo over and fell flat on her face on the rough sand.

Ow, shouted Halo, rubbing her head.

Waker scrambled up. Be quiet, there's...

Dealer was running and jumping around with Merlyn.

Be quiet, Waker shouted but the dogs ignored her running up and down the beach like they were on dog holiday.

We need to..., started Waker. Where's Theo?

Halo shrugged. Her eyes filled with tears. She was very muddy and her T-shirt was torn. Waker sat down next to her but kept watching the trees and the macabre doll collection. It reminded her of something.

Is this Doll Island?

Halo nodded.

I thought you were dead, said Waker.

Nah, said Halo. We ain't dead. But you takin a chance explorin Doll Island by y'ownself.

Halo squinted back at the dolls. Some had been gnawed. Some had flimsy dresses plastered to their plastic torsos. Some had no heads. Some had had their arms and legs torn off. Waker felt scared but with Halo and both the dogs here maybe they'd be okay. They could put up a fight. Maybe...

Thas Cousin Velvet's doin, said Halo, hugging her knees. Heard tell she didn't start it but look to me like she kept it going.

The dogs sniffed about, circling the beach. Then Merlyn stood up and sniffed the air. Dealer did the same. Merlyn barked and bounded into the trees. Dealer looked back at them and then followed.

What about Theo? Waker blurted.

He over there, Halo said.

What?

In the trees.

In the trees, like a haint?

Nah, like a boy who's got a dog to bury, said Halo, getting up.

Halo headed into the shade after the dogs. Waker followed not looking up at the trees. There was a crude track between pine and thick cypress trees. Some of the dolls had fallen from the trees and lay scattered about, watching them. Waker kept glancing behind her expecting the dolls to start crawling after them. She stuck so close to Halo when she stopped Waker bumped into her. Merlyn and Dealer waited on the path ahead. Silent.

Theo was standing on the path holding the soggy, bloody Pearl bundle. The air smelt bad. Flies buzzed around his tired face. He didn't say anything. He didn't seem surprised or even pleased they were there. He turned and headed off towards who knew what. Maybe he'd been waiting for them, but to Waker it looked like he'd forgotten who they were and why he was there.

Waker and Halo trudged after Theo. Merlyn kept close to Theo and what was left of Pearl. But Dealer wouldn't go near the stinking bundle. He stuck by Waker, now and again stepping on her feet when the path narrowed. Waker was glad he was with her. She felt they were being watched. Maybe it was just the creepy dolls' eyes but now it was too quiet and close under the thick trees. Even the insects seemed to have abandoned this place. To make matters worse Pearl was heavy and awkward to carry. What was left of her head kept slipping out of the blanket. They had to keep stopping for Theo to wrap and re-hitch the blanket shroud.

They climbed up a shallow slope where the path and trees opened out. Back in the day someone had laid red bricks to make a terrace. Although, over time tree roots had pushed up many of the bricks, making it uneven and tricky to walk across. But cross it they did. There was a crude stone seat in the middle. Someone had scratched a message across it but it was too old and worn to read. Theo laid Pearl down. They all stopped and looked around. Waker felt very thirsty. She noticed her puncture wound was crusted in greeny-yellow puss. She wiped it away and tried to ignore the fact she still felt feverish. Despite the trees the light was too bright. She wanted to lie down. But she knew this was dangerous. She needed to keep moving at least until they got back.

Theo knelt down and began to scrape at the earth beyond the terrace. Waker and Halo weren't sure of his plan or if he even had one. Perhaps he'd lost the plot completely? However, they knelt down beside him and did the same. When they'd made a shallow bowl Theo collected Pearl and put her in. He unbuckled her bloody collar and began yanking up bricks to cover her. He was making a cairn. They worked in silence. Merlyn and Dealer padded about nearby. Then it was done. Pearl's collar was placed on top. The sun was low. The air was warm and thick. Waker was now so thirsty she was sure she'd just drink the river water if they ever made it back to the beach. They sat on the stone seat and stared at the cairn.

Waker was happy and very sad at the same time. Pearl was dead but Halo, Theo, Merlyn and Dealer were alive. She was going to hang on to that. She then made the mistake of looking up. There were dolls here too. But they'd been here so long they were almost part of the trees. Some even had small branches growing through their broken faces. There were rag dolls grey green with mould. But the worst were the grinning baby dolls with cracked bellies and torn nappies. Waker shuddered. However, looking down was worse. She began to notice things she'd been too tired to take in before. There were grave stones leaning this way and that between the tree trunks. Most had a skull with wings at the top. Waker's mouth was so dry she couldn't even swallow. They were sitting in the middle of some ancient boneyard.

This is a real sad day, said Halo. We got tuh help her cross the ribber.

Theo sniffed and nodded. The sea brought us, the sea shall take us back, he muttered.

Halo and Waker repeated it. It helped a bit. Though, Waker felt like her heart was splitting and she was still very worried about where they were. It would be dark in a few hours.

But we glad Pearl's come to this... Halo cast around, place. The babies will be good company for her to play with. She can teach 'em things.

Babies? asked Waker, she wondered if Halo meant the Barbies.

Theo pointed at the graves.

This island where Ogelthorpes buried their babies, back in the day, said Halo. She stood up: We need to go before it gets dark.

Waker and Theo stood up. Waker felt stiff and a bit shivery. It was cooler now. She was still very thirsty. Her stomach rumbled but she didn't feel hungry, weird.

What about the Nephilim? said Waker.

Yeah, nodded Halo, They still in the boat, cursin it.

We leave them here, said Theo.

We caint drag them bags all this way, said Halo.

No, agreed Waker. They're too heavy and the sun's going down.

Theo puffed out his cheeks too tired to argue.

Maybe chunk 'em on the beach? suggested Halo.

Waker nodded. A good plan, dump them on the beach and launch the boat fast.

That ain't respectful, said Theo.

Waker and Halo knew he was right but they were scared and the Nephilim were already dead. It wasn't like they'd know any different. Maybe. And the dogs were getting nervous, their fur standing up. Waker didn't like this at all.

We caint do that, said Theo.

And why in the hell not? shouted Halo. The dogs growled.

Because she's here? said Theo.

SHE? said Halo.

Cousin Velvet.

Waker and Halo turned around.

Waker had been scared in the boat and with Clay and then when she nearly drowned trapped against the weir. Now she knew she was terrified. Her stomach felt like it had leapt up through the top of her head. While they'd been arguing Cousin Velvet had appeared behind them, shocking even the dogs. Waker and Halo stepped close to one another. Theo didn't move, like he was watching a cougar trying to figure out when it would spring and how bad the damage was likely to be. Dealer stepped forward and barked. Velvet smiled a slow smile, her front teeth were missing. In those three seconds Waker took in their opponent. She was taller than them but she was so bony she looked even taller. Her hair was like a giant bird's nest, all matted and muddy around her face but it was studded with cowrie shells as if she'd made her own tiara. However, her face was beautiful. If Waker hadn't been so terrified she would have just gawped at Velvet's high cheek bones and big amber eyes. She looked a lot like Waker's mom, *if Waker's mom had some colour.*

Cousin Velvet muttered something and moved her hand. Dealer trotted forward and licked it.

Holy shit, whispered Halo.

Merlyn stayed next to Theo, watchful. Dealer let Velvet rub his head. Maybe she wasn't so bad after all? Or maybe she had Hoodooed Dealer and they were next? Velvet

looked up, drew her other hand out of the pocket of her old coat and pointed a knife at them. It was a big knife. Waker jumped. Cousin Velvet stepped towards them. They all backed into the stone seat. Merlyn stood between them and Velvet. Velvet considered the other dog and spat across the brick terrace. Dealer watched Merlyn.

What y'all buildin? Her voice was rusty like she didn't speak very often. She pointed to the cairn.

We... buried... made a cairn for Pearl, said Theo.

Velvet frowned: Cairn, he say?

We buried Pearl, said Theo.

Why, she dead?

YES, they all answered at once.

Pearl was Theo's dog, blurted Waker. She didn't want Velvet to think they'd killed a child. The higgledy-piggledy cairn looked suspicious, like they were trying to cover up something fast.

Velvet knows who Pearl be, but who dis pale chile? Cousin Velvet stepped right up to Waker and tapped her chest with the knife. Waker could smell her own sweat and Velvet's all mingled together.

Our... your cuz'n... from London, ENGLAND, burst out Halo.

And you? said Velvet, turning the knife towards Halo.

I'm a cuz'n too.

Velvet waved her knife in the air, like it was all too much talking.

Is that a Bowie knife? said Theo.

Velvet nodded and held the blade out so it caught the evening sun.

Halo dug Theo in the back.

What? he said. I can ask? She ain't likely to forget a big-ass knife in her hand is she?

Why y'all tek My'own? Velvet leaned close to Halo, her knife poking Halo's shoulder.

A tear rolled down Halo's cheek. Velvet watched and waited.

Waker and Theo looked at one another and then the dolls. Merlyn growled.

The Nephilim, she mean the Nephilim, whimpered Halo.

Cousin Velvet moved fast. The knife flashed under Halo's chin. Halo screamed and held her head up as high as she could away from the blade. Merlyn and Dealer tensed waiting for Theo's command.

We were trying to save 'em, burst in Waker. Cousin Velvet swivelled her eyes to watch Waker's face. Waker gulped and continued. Her hands were shaking, like she was lying.

Sabe?

There was the flash flood, said Waker.

Yeah flash flood, echoed Theo.

Flash flood, squeaked Halo. Velvet lowered her knife.

Well ... we thought the Nephilim, the babies would ... drown? So we... well when they floated over to the trailer, we collected them and thought we couldn't ... put them back.

No, agreed Theo and Halo. No, we couldn't take 'em back.

Halo rubbed her chin: It was all underwater.

So, we thought to bury them here. This being a boneyard ... graveyard sort of island ... place.

They all looked around. It didn't look like the kind of place anyone in their right mind would come to bury dead children. But the Ogelthorpes had back in the day.

Velvet lowered the knife.

Did y'all bring nails?

Nails?

Velvet gestured towards the trees.

Theo grimaced, Halo looked very pale.

Well we thought we'd make cairns and the ones in jars, well they could... offered Waker.

Stay in the jars, added Halo, and maybe stand 'em next to the graves?

We ain't studyin on nailing dead babies to any trees, finished Theo.

Cumpn'y ain't brought hammer n'nails? Velvet shook her head as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. But something caught her eyes up in the trees.

Rab'n, she whispered. A large black bird launched itself across the terrace. Bess hurry 'fore it get dark and Plat-eye come git y'all. Velvet smiled.

They all trudged back to the boat and its grisly cargo. They stared at the bloated bags. The dogs kept their distance whimpering now and again. The sun was low on the beach giving everything a golden glow. But the smell of Nephilim made them all gag, even Velvet coughed. In the basement they'd been trapped in some sort of desiccated suspended animation. But now they been exposed to dirty flood water and sunshine they were rotting fast. Rancid meat, vinegar and sour milk smells rose up from the boat. Cousin Velvet put her knife between her teeth and ripped open the garbage bags. They all had to step back

for a moment as the smells mushroomed around them. Theo took his T-shirt off and wrapped it around his face. Waker and Halo pulled theirs up over their mouths.

Velvet eyed them suspiciously. Halo and Waker pulled their T-shirts down and clamped their mouths shut. They didn't want to upset someone with a big knife. Velvet leaned down and scooped up a mess of Nephilim and slid them into her skirt.

That's a good idea, said Halo. We'll take the pickled... jar babies.

Waker and Theo nodded.

Berrywellden, said Cousin Velvet, she turned and strode away into the trees.

Theo was still nodding his head. Halo leaned over and began to tug at a large jar, Waker helped her. Soon they were following Velvet with a jar slopping between them. The baby sloshed from side to side, its big head butting the glass when they stumbled on a tree root. Waker lost track of time again. Her arms and back hurt. Even sharing the load with Halo the jars were still heavy. If they'd had the nerve they could've unscrewed the lids and just taken the Nephilim up the beach, but none of them had the stomach for that. Waker tripped and pitched face forward into a straggly bush. She shrieked expecting to be stung. But it wasn't stinging nettles it was mint. A cool sharp smell filled the air. Halo jumped right in after her. They rolled around forgetting snakes and fire ants. They peeled off leaves with their teeth and chewed them. It felt like the best thing Waker had eaten in a long time. In fact it was the only thing she'd eaten in a long time. And she felt less feverish. The light was less bright amongst the trees. She ached a bit less. Halo crushed the leaves and shoved them up her nose. Waker copied. It took away some of the awful stink that surrounded them. They stood up and dragged up great clumps and stuck it in their T-shirts and their grubby hair. Merlyn barking on the beach reminded them to get it back together.

It was twilight on the Island now. The sky was still light but the sun had gone. Pools of shade filled up between the trees. The dogs hung about on the beach, waiting, not wanting to follow them in their gruesome task. Merlyn barked again urging them home. Dealer took up the chorus. Finally, they stood on the terrace considering their work. Halo and Waker had placed each jarred Nephilim next to a headstone. Waker found herself hoping they'd be out of the sun come morning, as this would slow their rot. Theo and Cousin Velvet had worked together, dragging up dirt to cover the other Nephilim; then they'd ripped up more bricks to cover them. Though, Waker doubted any wild animals would to eat them, more likely avoid the whole sorry place.

They waited for some sort of sign from Velvet. She wandered around the boneyard visiting each Nephilim in turn, like a mom tucking her children into bed. She kept up a fierce muttering: Big John de Conquer done everything big on earth went up tuh heben without dying atall. Went up to heben picking a guitar got all de angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne... without dying atall...

D'you think she named 'em? said Theo.

Halo shuddered. Waker rubbed her mint leaves, trying to clean her hands. Velvet swept back towards them her long raggedy skirt flapping around her lean legs. She pulled something out of her pocket. They all stepped back expecting the knife. Waker cursed the dogs for hanging about on the beach. But it was an old gold lipstick canister, all bitten around the edges; as if the person who used it didn't know how it worked. Velvet smiled her slow smile. She caught Halo's chin and pulled off the cap with her teeth. Then she leaned towards Halo and rolling up the pink lipstick drew two lines either side of her nose.

She did the same to Waker and Theo and lastly herself. Theo just shrugged when Halo raised her eyebrows.

Ain't got no blood, b'dout thas gunna come...

They were all relieved Velvet was using lipstick instead of blood but they really didn't want to hang around to find out what was going to come later. Cousin Velvet began to hum walking in anti-clockwise circles around the terrace. She waved her hand indicating they should follow. They did. Now and again Velvet would stop and spit at the nearest cairns. Waker wasn't sure if they were meant to do the same but she had no spit to give. Her mouth, despite the mint, was still completely dry. Theo and Halo didn't spit either.

Cousin Velvet began to clap. They copied. Then she began to sing punctuating the verses with a mad shout. Tagetha, she screamed.

Y'all sick, muttered Halo but she joined right in. The Bowie knife was a great motivator. Soon they were all clapping hard, and shouting:

I wonder where my mudder gone;

Sing, O grabeyard!

Grabeyard ought to know me;

Ring, Jerusalem!

Grass grow in de grabeyard;

Sing, O grabeyard!

Grabeyard ought to know me;

Ring, Jerusalem!

The river and blood and Pearl and her dad all swirled around in Waker's head making her dizzy until the clapping and the shouting took over and all she could feel was the thump

of their stamping feet and the rhythm of their chants. The dogs returned. Dealer followed them barking. Merlyn sat up tall next to Pearl's cairn, a witness.

However, they were exhausted. The gap between them and Velvet slowly grew until she was walking alone on the other side of the terrace. She stopped, stowed her lipstick and disappeared like liquid into the trees.

How she do that? whispered Theo.

Who cares, said Halo, We need to git. I ain't hanging around for no mo trabbelin' speerits.

They ran back to the boat. Not being able to see Velvet was worse than knowing where she was.

Is that a Bowie knife? mimicked Halo, as they shoved off.

Well it was, said Theo.

The oars had gone so they let the boat drift until it hit a sand bar, near the bank, and they could wade to shore. Waker wondered how Velvet got on and off the island but she was too tired and hungry to ask the others. It was dark as they headed across a rutted meadow and then another hoping to hit a road. Instead they found an abandoned praisehouse with blue plastic tacked over the door. They pulled it down and curled up inside to wait for morning. But the thick black night pressed in through the door hole, keeping them all awake.

When dawn came they were cold, stiff and bitten. However, outside there was an old-time water pump; they'd missed in the darkness. When they got it working, jerking the metal arm up and down, they drank themselves silly; drenching themselves and the dogs. Then they hit a farm track where Theo flagged a ride.

It's Stills' people, he said, waving down a cherry red Chevy.

A pale couple with a small feisty dog, nodded: mornin. Waker couldn't tell if they were an old looking young couple or a young looking old couple. The dogs barked their greetings. The woman raised a thin eyebrow.

Y'all bin playin out in these woods?

Yas'um, they all nodded. Halo slowly pulled the mint out of her T-shirt.

Y'all need a ride to the fed-er-al highway?

Yas'um.

Well git in then, don't mind Sumter, he just a fambly fyce, the woman stroked the little dog's tufty head. Waker almost laughed, after Cousin Velvet and her Bowie knife a fyce was no big deal.

And I'm sho glad y'all had fun playin cannibels, but try keepin that darn mud and lipstick off my up-hol-stery, said the man.

Funeral

Waker leant back on the padded seat, while the Chevy rumbled away beneath them, and tried to think. It had been such a shock to see Clay and realise he was Halo's dad. Even though he was a bit shit, well a lot shit, he was real. Waker wondered if she'd ever had a dad after all. How could he have been real and then just drifted away like fog burnt off by the morning sun? After he died no one mentioned him. Their flat was filled with dead air instead. Sometimes Waker thought she'd suffocate; the dead air was too thick. Her mom caught her standing on a chair on the kitchen table, gulping for breath; the skylight shoved open as far as it would go. Waker was taken to the doctor for an asthma check. Then it was back to the flat for weeks. Her mom spent all her time on the phone or sleeping. She would smile like a painted doll if Waker caught her by surprise. Waker had taken to reading and re-reading the same old books in her room. Then she'd tried to read them backwards. This didn't work. So she began cutting up the big books and rearranging the writing. When her mom failed to notice Waker extended her project by sticking the words along the wall. As the walls were white it looked good. She added pictures chopping up the faces and rearranging their stories. Soon it was all she could think about: paper faces, words and sellotape. She loved the sound the tape made when she ripped it from the roll. Sometimes when she cut it with her teeth it stuck to her lips. So she added her blood to the collage. Maybe she wasn't so different to Cousin Velvet and the rest of the Ogelthorpes after all?

Her mom continued to sit in her chair smoking. Fags piled up around her like fairy rings. Nana-North broke up the party, such as it was, and told Waker's mom they needed to get out because Waker was getting too weird. Waker's mom fag in one hand, phone in

the other disagreed. She's just dissociated is all. Waker thought this sounded cool and went to look it up. Nana-North carried on: have you seen her face, it's coated in dried blood? Waker rubbed her crusty chin, it didn't matter. Her dad had gone.

Her life seemed to be one big either or. You could have one thing but not the other. Either she lived in London and stayed inside or she lived out in The Empty and stayed outside. Either she had a mom or a dad. Theo just had a dad. People either had cats or dogs.

However, in spite of the alleged disassociation, Waker felt very relieved when she spotted Coeur D'Alene's rusting farm gate up ahead. It was open. There was a large For Sale tacked to a post. It felt like a year since she was last here. Did she feel different or maybe just taller? But there was no time to ruminate. When they rounded the bend they saw Waker's mom leaning on a hire car smoking, Halo's mom, with a city suit matching her Lexus, was on her phone and Grampa Theo was sitting on one of the Adirondacks looking old.

Holy crap, hissed Theo.

Uh huh, agreed Halo. All y'all in for it now.

The adults were relieved, but very angry at the same time. There were hugs then shouting. And barking. Then more hugs then more shouting. Then they were inside the trailer with Grampa Theo frying everything in sight, Waker's mom smoking, and Halo's mom phoning all in sundry, including the sheriff, who'd been out looking for them since dawn. The longer Halo's mom stayed on the phone the angrier she got relaying: yes the children were fine and no they hadn't drowned. She slipped into Gullah with kin who

counted: skaytodet ... uh huh ... playin out in the pinelan Clay? Don't ax'me where he's hidin ...

Waker, kept her head down shovelling up grits, scramble eggs and bacon. She felt like she'd been crammed back into a very crowded box. She wanted to be back out there in The Empty. Theo covered his food in hot sauce and mayo. Halo piled her food onto fried Eggos and drenched it in corn syrup. They were very hungry. And they were very tired, and this probably saved them. They were too tired to answer all the questions fired at them. So the adults, as adults tend to do, filled in the gaps. They filled it in with the flood water. Grampa Theo didn't look convinced but he knew better than to take on two very angry women.

Later it got very quiet and very hot. Clay's body had been found. There was baffled talk about a 'freak accident'. The sheriff was outside the trailer his radio crackling. Waker sat next to Halo and Theo on his bunk, waiting. Merlyn sat at their feet. Dealer sniffed about the muddy remains of Theo's comic collection. Waker wondered if Halo would cry. Instead she said: when this mess over, I'm gunna buy you some more comics.

Me too, said Waker. Maybe I can find some rare ... unusual ones in London.

Unusual? said Theo, raising his eyebrows.

Like a du'tty mag-a-zine? T'Challa, bess be ready, Halo snorted and covered her mouth.

Waker smiled but London felt like an old book she'd outgrown. She didn't want to go back. They listened to the sheriff's car drive away. He didn't even talk to them. Grampa Theo went off to the barn to start what he called the big kickeraboo clean-up. He gave the impression that they could damn well grieve and work at the same time. But Waker and

Halo's mom filled up some bowls of water, left them around the trailer and shared a cigarette on the steps. Their soft voices mingled with the drone of insects. Occasionally their laughter punctured the long afternoon like birds lifting and settling on the rotten porch across the meadow.

Seven days later they made the broiling drive out to Black Locust Cemetery. Waker was trying to decide if they'd actually killed Clay. It was hot as hell. Even under the spindly trees, the heat pressed down like molten molasses. Waker leaned against a chain-link fence that separated the cemetery from the blank highway. Head stones fanned away towards the horizon. Many had shells, dusty bottles and cracked cups balanced on top. One was covered in rusty saucepans and another had pale blue saucers embedded in the concrete cross. Here and there small mirrors reflected the sunlight on to the live oaks and Spanish moss that covered the roads through the cemetery.

Theo walked up and down, kicking bits of rock and gravel across the melting blacktop, his neck burning, his blond hair plastered to his sweaty head. It was odd seeing him without his dogs. Halo hummed to herself. Now and again she looked at the hem of her dress sparkling with sequins; shards of sunlight spattered across her face. Her ribbons had come undone hanging limp like black streamers left over from a Casket Girl Carnival.

Waker needed to sit down. She wanted to curl up, cross all her fingers and tell herself it was all over. The sheriff wasn't coming for them. They hadn't *really* killed anyone. Had they? But sitting at the side of the highway at a funeral wasn't right. Halo's aunts, uncles and cousins had been kind murmuring Sugar and Honey, hugging them all again and again. However, they weren't the sort of people who'd stand for any sitting in the dirt. They wore coats and hats in defiance of the heat. The older women wore cotton gloves. They came

in a tide of deep dark colours surging around Clay's white relatives. Clay's kin stayed cold and quiet, getting back into their air-conditioned sedans as soon as the pastor finished his piece. They didn't seem real to Waker, just paper cut-outs from an upscale catalogue: pale and flimsy. Waker's mom hovered at the edge. Halo's mom wore large sunglasses keeping her thoughts to herself. Grampa Theo swapped flood clean-up 'vice with the other old boys and young men anxious to show they knew a claw hammer from a nail gun.

Waker rubbed sweat from her forehead. Her new T-shirt prickled her raw neck. The mourners murmured. Most avoided looking at the sleek coffin. No-one wanted to be reminded of the regurgitated remains of Bad Blue's flash flood feast. Someone was singing deep. It sounded like an old song:

An' I hope dat trumpet blow me home

To my New Jerusalem!

Then another voice lighter than the rest:

High John de Conquer all done on de earth

went up tuh heben without dying atall.

Went up tuh heben picking his guitar

got all de angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne...

For Waker it felt like there'd been two funerals going on at the same time. The pastor reading and talking, holding his bible open with his thumb, while the mourners spoke softly adding in things they considered he'd missed. At first he'd paused politely for: help him cross the ribber. But at the mention of on-easy speerit he decided to plough on over the top of the commentary, flinty eyed. Eventually, there was some sort of accord when the pastor admitted defeat and joined in with: the sea brought us; the sea shall take us back.

Waker was glad she knew this part from Pearl's funeral. However, she was as surprised, as the pastor was angry, by what happened next. A young man called Folee picked up Halo and passed her over the coffin to another lad who passed her back again. An old woman leaned down and whispered in Waker's ear: keep ole Clay frum follin yuh back tuh duh house. The pastor cleared his throat indicating he was drawing a line. It was time to disperse.

Heat waves wobbled and distorted The Empty horizon. They'd wandered away from the mourners, bored now by adult conversation.

Halo was watching her. He gunna come, she said. Just biding... she trailed off and looked towards the mourners.

Waker shivered.

A car door slammed. Waker jumped. Somebody shouted a goodbye. Someone chuckled.

We got a story, Waker balled up her fists. It was suddenly all too much. Too much pretending she wasn't a semi-killer and that she wasn't really sad about going 'home'. And the story felt like an empty mojo bag.

That ain't gunna work, whispered Halo. She rubbed the sequins cutting her eyes at Waker and Theo.

Theo stopped kicking stones. He put his hands back in his pockets. Halo stomped up to Waker.

And you leavin The Empty. You free, get on a plane. Halo stepped back and folded her arms.

Waker lost it. She shoved Halo, sending her stumbling backwards. Halo came back at her. Then they were all twisted up pushing and stamping and yanking one another's hair. It ended when they fell over and hit the asphalt hard. Grit prickled their skin. They sat glaring at one another. Waker rubbed her elbow. Halo rubbed her legs.

She ain't leavin, said Theo. You caint fly *if* gone to jail. You ladies best get along from now on cuz you gunna be sharing a cell 'till you old. Hiding and squealing every time some big ole gal comes knockin for some sugar.

Some sugar? said Halo.

Uh huh, said Theo.

Halo kicked Waker's foot. You gunna be someone's sugar?

No, said Waker trying hard not to cry.

Nah, it's gunna be Theo. Yo blond skinny-ass, gunna be the sugar, laughed Halo.

Waker smiled.

Halo stood up and brushed down her sequins. She held out her hand to Waker.

Waker took it and stood up. And it was sort of an 'accident', said Waker.

You gunna tell that to Sheriff Hoang? asked Halo.

If you want, said Waker.

Gal, you a freak for sure. Hell, you might even get sent to the state farm instead of jail, Halo grinned.

A car appeared barrelling towards them.

We all sugar now, said Theo. It's Deputy Bamboula.

The car, outlandish even by American standards, was extra wide and iridescent like oil sliding across a bubble. It made Waker queasy. The car stopped. The driver's window

slid down. A very large woman with caramel curls, pink lips and thickly drawn eyebrows squinted at them. She tapped the steering wheel with false nails exactly the same colour as her lips.

Well I do declare... she began.

Halo stepped forward.

Waker wondered did the woman want directions? Maybe she was a honky-tonk singer? Waker wasn't sure what honky-tonk was exactly, but the word seemed to fit.

Hey baby, the woman said.

Hey Deputy ... Miss Bamboula, mumbled Halo, rubbing her dirty face.

Theo appraised the car.

You need a lift chile?

No'm.

Yo daddy's flun'rul? Miss Bamboula nodded towards the milling mourners heaving themselves into the hired Cadillacs and shiny sedans.

Yas'um, Halo nodded.

Y'all friends?

Yas'um.

Good to have friends, these times. Miss Bamboula looked at Waker, assessing her for friend material. Waker's face went red. She'd failed as friend material today.

Theo sauntered up to the car and took his hands out of his pockets. Miss Bamboula nodded. He nodded back.

Suh... Ma'am, he corrected himself.

'Ppreciate it, gal's off duty to-day. Miss Bamboula leaned her head out of the window. Her curls fanned out around her face. Waker had never seen hair like it; she looked like a very expensive doll.

When you get home chile, 'afore y'all step inside, be sure and wipe your feet, be sure and do that, y'all hear me.

Theo began to smile.

Wipe that no'count jelly-roll outta your lives.

Yas'um, they all replied.

Y'all just remember, wipe that goofer-dust away.

And with that she leaned back in and squirmed herself comfortable.

She looked in the mirror and began to pull at her hair, revealing a smooth bald head.

Y'all 'scuse me, as y'all won't be needin a ride, might as well rest my hair. Sheriff shut early. She laughed. We ain't in the bidness of arrestin no catfish. She watched them closely. Nothing left for a po deputy to do 'cept fix her nails. Still, gal gotta wonder what ole Clay was doin wading the river. She shrugged. Waker, Halo and Theo stood very still. They wore their poker faces. They held their breath, keeping their eyes blank.

Miss Bamboula? blurted Waker. Halo and Theo tensed. Thank God they didn't have Dealer to give them away. *Are you a man?* It was all Waker could think to say.

Thas rude, muttered Halo, but it broke the spell.

Theo wasn't sure which way this was going.

Miss Bamboula, paused letting them sweat. She put her finger up to her lips. Then she nodded in the direction of the mourners. Some were squinting down the blacktop, watching. She winked at Halo and blew two kisses at Waker and Theo.

Ain't no sin in good 'tention, she said looking at Halo's scraped knees. The window closed. Miss Bamboula drove slowly away, her car disappearing into The Empty. Waker, Theo and Halo looked at one another. They'd been handed a reprieve. The Empty filled with summer. And as for those For Sale signs they disappeared and anyway what damn fool would try to buy The Empty?

Acknowledgements

A Huge Thank you to the following heroes:

uns **dayclean** I had to collect what happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry
isin in the sun? Or fester like a sore-and then run? Does it stink like rotten
ZORA To and sugar over-like a syrupy sweet? Settr Maybe it just s... like a heavy

David Vowles

research about? Stranger... nas it altered the neid. urts Hoodoo bottle
charms conjure root working root doctoring Voodoo trapped evil spirits can to

Phoebe Vowles-Webb

Confederate flag **lick** cheers taken down for final time lunch counter lunch coun

Tatum Vowles-Webb

LUNCH COUNTER twinset and pearls American Civil War Lincoln swans Chachalacas

Loons shearwaters Storm Petrels Fri birds **crookety** Cormorants Pelicans

gns road Georgia cotton

s Deep South Didion accretion feedback Ame

Madness **cawch** madness MADNESS plantation the sunken place southernness

Dr James Miller

Mudbound simulacrum Brown Thrasher Cherokee rose Live oak stars and bars

Professor Fred Botting

mountain Atlanta **seuse** Peach Tree Okefenokee Swamp Flint Providence Canyon

Tallulah Gorge Panther Creek Falls Lullwater Park Savannah the Last slave Zora Zora

Kingston University School of Art (KSA)

like a rai Toni TONI **seuso** Yoruba Oluale Kossola Gullah daylight What is this

at? Or crust an Things How h... angston Hughes 1951. Remoteness Isolation

Jane Wilson

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Annie Riha

dark and deep what gets redacted? Flood flood FLOOD *Light in August The Sound and The*

Hannah Christian

Fury Chronotope corrugated iron mist and fog backbone backbone **skaytudet** a

zig zag path homemade road s... in KKK Bluesmen Robert Johnson
and Johnny Shiner De... American dreaming Southern

Ardella Jones (R.I.P.) and every one at Chalk the Sun

buckruh Herons Blue Herons Vultures Hawks Coots Gulls Barn Owls Nightjars Swifts

Humming Birds Kingfishers Ravens Larks Whippoorwill Shrikes Mourning Dove

Patricia Borlenghi, my publisher at Patrician Press

*Da' big dog, 'e bite 'um Duh him da' cry out so Uh tell 'um say da'
dog fuh bite 'um De dog run, gone, bite 'um Da' duh big big dog*

And the Nero baristas at Tooting and Tandem Centre, Colliers Wood

Footnote Bibliography

'Most of the great flame-throwers were there and naturally, handling Big John de Conquer and his works. How he had done everything big on earth, then went up tuh heben without dying atall. Went up there picking a guitar and got all de angels doing the ring-shout round and round de throne...' (Hurston in Gates, 230)³.

³ Zora Neale Hurston, 'Their eyes were watching God'. in *The signifying monkey, a theory of African American literary criticism* by Henry Louis Gates JR. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.230.

1 Why Southern Gothic? A brief introduction

My PhD journey started with a story germ that I followed using my intuition. There were three adults trapped on the edge of a ruined plantation in the American South. It developed into a long short story including something that looked like incest (but was not really) and something else that looked like a murder (just a temper tantrum leading to a bloody accident). The landscape was all long grass and a river. In order to ‘colour that in’ I needed to do some research. In the meantime I read the story at a writers’ workshop. The other writers praised my skill but disliked my content. One listener got very emotional and shouted that all the characters were horrible. I was secretly pleased my writing had had such an effect. And I did not agree that the characters were horrible at all. I had stumbled in to Southern Gothic as a genre and realised that though these characters may be horrible in another genre in Southern Gothic they not only made sense but were decent people trying to play the hand they had been dealt.

For the purposes of the PhD and to create a context for my story and characters I decided to focus on writing and researching the place, the time-space of the novel using Bakhtin’s chronotope. I knew this would enable me to write a better novel, (anchoring the characters and action somewhere concrete) and use what I learned in the process, to teach other writers how to develop their craft. Focusing on the chronotope allowed me to explain my writing process by deconstructing and reconstructing it; illustrating it and providing worked examples or evidence for my process. I consider this a practical way to

highlight creativity at work, more accessible than trying to explain and show unconscious processes and creative intuition.

However, I knew very little about Southern Gothic and the American South and to make matters more difficult I lacked the wherewithal to visit. And writers of the Southern literary canon frequently state that only born and bred Southerners such as William Faulkner and contemporary M.O. Walsh (among many others outlined later in my thesis) can write the South with any competence and skill. In fact, this is a key feature of the Southern canon: the insistence by many Southern writers, academics and commentators that the South, or rather writing the South, belongs only to 'indigenous' or 'native' writers. I would need to explore this feature (or obstacle) to try to overcome this barrier. Although, it was initially worrying information because it may mean my project would be doomed to failure or worse some ersatz pastiche of Southern fried moonlight and magnolias meets *Deliverance*? However, my contribution became a rebuttal to the autochthonic view that it is only possible to write a good Southern [Gothic] novel if you are a native Southerner. I synthesised Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, Southern scholarship and creative writing practices through collage and intuition providing a methodology that allowed me to overcome and master this obstacle.

Southern Gothic gave my creativity latitude. My novel title changed from *Learning American* to *Three Kids and a dead dog*, because my novel was not Gothic, or English eerie like my first published novel *Darkling Park*. Southern Gothic was the mirror cylinder needed to see the design clearly, as in the process of anamorphosis art (Oxford English Dictionary: a distorted image which appears normal when viewed from a particular point or with a suitable mirror or lens). Southern Gothic allowed me to write about a giant catfish mauling

a man to death as an act of poetic justice. And the hording mummified foetuses became an act of compassion, not a horror side-show.

And as to not being able to travel I decided to make my constraints create the innovations needed. I would travel by literature. After all Hilary Mantel did not go back in time to the court of Henry v111, she travelled by text⁴. I would do the same.

‘Limitations may be the most unlikely of places to harness creativity, but perhaps one of the best ways to get ourselves out of ruts, rethink categories and challenge accepted norms. And instead of telling each other to seize the day maybe we can remind ourselves every day to seize the limitation’ (Hansen)⁵.

Alice Randall’s *The wind done gone* (2001) was key. Randall is a black writer from Michigan who used white writer Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the wind* (1936) to re-write the South. This was inspiring and also gave me permission to carry on with this transgressive project. It is for my readers to decide if I have failed or succeeded. In the next chapter I will define the key terms that will form the foundation of my thesis. And finally a word of warning, adopting a collage methodology allowed me to let my imagination roam in my novel but also in my thesis. It gave me creative latitude to cut and paste anything I considered relevant to my process. This is why Marco Polo and Hilary Mantel appear for example, despite having very little if anything to do with the American South and Southern Gothic. Such a process, in my view, sparks the potential for more original thinking and possibly new insights than a traditional monograph on the Southern Gothic genre.

⁴ *The Reith lectures: adaptation* by Hilary Mantel (UK: BBC Radio 4, 18 July 2017)

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08tcbrp>> [Radio Podcast].

⁵ Phil Hansen, *Ted talks: embrace the shake* (2013)

<https://www.ted.com/talks/phil_hansen_embrace_the_shake> [accessed 30 October 2020].

2 Gothic and Southern Gothic defined and differentiated

It is important to start with an outline of the differences between Gothic and Southern Gothic for the following reasons. Gothic is relevant to my thesis as a springboard as it laid the groundwork for the haunted house in literature. However, Gothic and Southern Gothic are two distinct genres, though they are cousins. Fred Botting characterises the Gothic as:

‘Gothic atmospheres—gloomy and mysterious—have repeatedly signalled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents [...]’ (Botting, 1)⁶.

‘[...] Gothic writing remains fascinated by objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic’ (Botting, 1)⁷.

Gothic, as Botting posits, is a medium concerned with transgression and taboo. My interest though is more specific: that of the Gothic setting of ancient feudal castles, ruined abbeys and decaying graveyards inhabited by ghosts. Other tropes include: a journey in stormy weather, creating an atmosphere of growing dread; landscape reflecting the protagonist’s state of mind; a decaying house symbiotically connected to a declining dynasty; a weak or naïve hero; internment or someone (or something) buried alive and of course supernatural events.

Southern Gothic contains much of the above (particularly transgression and taboo) but there is a greater emphasis on the macabre and the grotesque. Southern Gothic is set in the ‘new world’ where medieval castles and Norman churches do not exist. Southern Gothic iterations tend to be wrapped in realist texts about poor or fading people in forgotten towns, or rotting and warped (what Americans refer to as Victorian) houses. Botting’s summary highlights the key features:

⁶ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Taylor Francis Group, 1995), p.1.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.1.

‘The sense of a grotesque, irrational and menacing presence pervading the everyday, and causing its decomposition, emerges in the Gothic fiction produced predominantly, in the Southern states of America. Centred on houses in the tradition established by [Edgar Allan] Poe, in ‘The fall of the house of Usher’, the disintegration of the normal and familiar in Southern Gothic signals the decay of family and culture. The disjointed perspectives of William Faulkner’s fiction present a decaying, grotesque and absurd world through the disturbed consciousness of misfits and malcontents often on the verge of insanity’ (Botting, 105)⁸.

These are the kinds of dark houses that you may find in any neighbourhood where local children make up scare stories and dare one another to run up the steps and bang on the door. Adults often add to the narrative with some macabre or sad tale of woe about blighted lives and bad choices leading to ostracism and grief. But why does the American South have a particular school devoted to this phenomenon?

The phrase ‘the Southern Gothic school’ first appeared in 1935 in a *Saturday Review* article by novelist Ellen Glasgow who used the term negatively to refer to the writings of Erskine Caldwell and Faulkner, which she believed were filled with ‘aimless violence’ and ‘fantastic nightmares’ (Marshall, 3)⁹.

More recently and more positively: ‘David Punter and Glennis Byron describe Southern Gothic as “investigating madness, decay and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with respect to the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and to the continuance of racial hostilities” (Marshall, 3)¹⁰.

⁸ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Taylor Francis Group, 1995), p.105.

⁹ Bridget M. Marshall, ‘Defining Southern Gothic’. in *Southern Gothic literature* (ed). by Jay Ellis (Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013), p.3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.3.

The past intruding on to the present is fundamental in the writing of buildings in the Southern Gothic such as ruined plantation houses destroyed during the American Civil War, (not unlike the ruined European Gothic castle).

‘These buildings hearken back to a lost past; the fact that they will never be restored, but only continue to decay often motivates the offspring of the aristocratic class and serves as a visible punishment to the untamed and ultimately ruinous power of the earlier generation’ (Marshall, 7).¹¹.

There are some distinct and peculiar characteristic in the American South that formed a fertile soil for a distinct genre: a ‘romantic feudal’ society and a ‘Lost Cause’, or rather brutal capitalism where people were kidnapped, abused and enslaved; re-branded as property and a bloody Civil War fought to continue said economic system; Magnolias and moonlight above snakes and treacherous swamps; Jim Crow and the misnomer ‘Reconstruction’, lynching and night riders, bigotry and share cropping; old-school manners and brutal segregation. These juxtapositions ferment disquiet, things bubbling up at the edges, between the cracks. A native or a visitor with only a little historical, cultural or political knowledge will be able to scan a Southern main street, the fields bordering the highway or woods and perceive these incongruous layers. The landscape is frightening not because a gator may snatch your dog at twilight but because it is haunted by the lynching of men, women and children. Contemporary media and social media show us that such trauma is not confined ‘safely’ to the distant past either.

‘Critic Margie Burns cites the prevalence throughout Southern Gothic of “secretive enclosures: darkened rooms with drawn blinds and wisteria crawling over their windows, New Orleans-style wrought-iron grillwork sheltering yet-undescribed Creole mysteries,

¹¹ Ibid, p7.

shadowy veranda and backyards behind massed azaleas, distant woods at the edge of fields of stubble, and so forth” (Marshall, 7-8).¹².

I argue from my reading of Southern and Southern Gothic literature that the landscape itself, the outside, is a darkened room where bad things have happened under cover of darkness and in broad daylight. Kudzu crawls by the side of the road making sinister shapes of uneven ground and telegraph poles. Blinds are drawn, shutters are shut, the woods are wide and you may find yourself in a sundown town such as those written about by Patrick Phillips in *Blood at the root, the racial cleansing in America* (2016). Phillips grew up in Cumming, Forsyth County, Georgia an area that was all white until the 1990s. At least 1,098 black residents had been burnt out and terrorised into leaving in 1912. And the terror continued. It was unsafe for any black person to travel through or work in the county. And to stay after sundown could cost you your life.

From my reading of the South, literature, history and journalism it is clear that the landscape (the outside) has all the elements of a Gothic house. In fact, it becomes a Gothic house. While in fictional Gothic, counts and lords were sacrificing innocents and bundling naïve travellers into their dungeons, in the American South over 4,100 men, women and children were publicly lynched (Gregory)¹³. Such events were not always hidden, photographs were taken by newspapers. Some lynchings were announced in advance to allow families time to organise their picnics and post cards were sold.

‘Lynching postcards were so common a form of communication in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America that lynching scenes “became a burgeoning sub department of the postcard industry. By 1908, the trade had grown so large

¹² Ibid, pp.7-8.

¹³ Vanessa Gregory, ‘A lynching’s long shadow’, *The New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 25 2018 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/magazine/a-lynchings-long-shadow.html?mtrref=t.co>> [accessed 15 August 2018].

[...] the U.S. post master general banned the cards from the mails”
(Wilkerson, 93-94)¹⁴.

Thus, the Southern landscape became an excessive place of horror, abuse and sacrifice. Such events were well known and well publicised as illustrated by the popular postcard industry and local newspapers. Lynching has taken place, and continues to take place, across the United States. However, culturally it has become associated with the South in particular; and the Southern ‘outside’ specifically. Southern literature and the Southern outside is haunted by this heritage whether a writer is including the phenomenon or not. Quiet lanes, back roads, town squares and tall trees are interchangeable with the dark corridors, creepy libraries and creaky attics of a classic Gothic house. Both are menacing, dangerous and will end badly for some. What makes Southern Gothic potent is that it draws on this reality whereas Gothic is mostly fiction. In the next chapter I will use three key writers whose work illustrates Southern Gothic and supports my thesis.

¹⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste, the lies that divide us* (UK: Allen Lane, 2020), pp.93-94.

3 Donna Tartt, Mary Ward Brown and Dorothy Allison illustrate the Southern Gothic macabre and grotesque

I will focus on the key Southern Gothic tropes of the macabre and the grotesque. These two tropes distinguish Southern Gothic from the Gothic or what might be termed European Gothic more generally. However, I am specifically focusing on the landscape in the Southern Gothic novel because from my research I have concluded that the landscape (or the outside) exhibits and even embodies all the elements of the Gothic haunted house. I intend to interrogate and explore my theory, while using it as a tool to build a credible Southern Gothic novel. As a writer, I must research and tailor my story world in order that it carries, reflects and augments my narrative.

I will draw upon on a variety of Southern fiction, most often set in the South and written by Southern born authors, with several interesting exceptions. These writers are my 'family tree' for this project. I will be taking elements from a rich and highly specific gene pool. If I push this metaphor further the 'interesting exceptions' are the mutations which enable my writing process. Although, I chose authors by an intuitive research process that mirrored my creative writing instincts, these writers can be mapped and connected on a Southern literary family tree.

In order to plan and create my novel or literary experiment I engaged in close textual readings of Donna Tartt and Mary Ward Brown and others to identify the Gothic and more specifically the Southern Gothic elements. It was important to read for the macabre and the grotesque but also for Southern culture, landscape and language. However, first it is worth spending a brief time distinguishing between Gothic and Southern Gothic with textual examples to highlight the conceptual differences. Both Tartt's *The little friend*

(2002) and my novel *Three kids and a dead dog* contain Gothic and Southern Gothic

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elements within the same texts. A novel can be both Gothic and Southern Gothic. However, the inclusion or emphasis on the macabre and grotesque tips a text into Southern Gothic. I chose Tartt's novel because it is a gorgeous, excessive read, set in her native Mississippi. The novel ticks all the usual Gothic, Southern and Southern Gothic boxes. It is set in an affluent white Mississippi small town suburb where Harriet's older brother Robin is found hanging from a tupelo tree. The family implodes after Robin's death. His killer is never found. Harriet has a theory about who did it and decides, with the help of her best friend Hely, to take her own revenge. Tartt represents the South through three social groups. Harriet's family, a white dynasty in decline, their once grand plantation house Tribulation a ruin, with various eccentric and nostalgic aunts left over from a previous era; the poor and feckless working class whites 'white trash': the Ratliff family who spend their time running an illegal methamphetamine manufacturing business, taxidermy for hunting trophies and general violent and paranoid behaviour; the black 'help' such as Ida Rhew and Odean, who work hard with dignified restraint that comes of navigating and surviving under Jim Crow. There is a belief amongst the family that if Harriet's mom, Charlotte Cleve, had not changed the timing of the Mother's Day dinner tradition, Robin would still be alive. She disrupted the 'natural order' of things which brought down the family.

Alongside the usual tropes the story is both macabre and grotesque. Examples of the grotesque: Robin's death for years after becomes a children's playground game; Gum the grandmother of the Ratliff clan, who rubbishes any attempt at aspiration or decency in her grandsons; Farish a violent criminal and Eugene who suffers from religious mania. And the macabre: Harriet's revenge stealing a five-foot cobra from Eugene's snake

handling ministry and tipping it off a bridge into the Ratliff's car as they drive underneath, where it attaches itself to the vile Gum. Harriet had planned to catch Danny Ratliff, the lad she is convinced killed her brother. The killer is not revealed at the end of the novel, if indeed Robin was murdered. It may have been a misadventure.

For my thesis I have put her novel in conversation with the work of Brown (or Mary T as she is affectionately known). Brown was another Southern writer, from Alabama, but one who achieved the Southern writing spell with a lot less words in short stories. She described the culture, landscape and language in lush lyrical prose which is often considered the mark of the Southern canon. I will focus on two in particular: *The cure* and *The black dog* from a collection of short stories called *Tongues of flame* (1989).

In *The cure* Ella Hogue an elderly black woman is dying. Her three adult daughters return to sit with her in her shack in Alabama. Ella refuses to go to hospital stating: ““ I don't need nobody,” she said. “The Lord be with me”” (Brown, 21)¹⁵. Eventually Ella asks for Dr Dobbs a doddering old white doctor that the daughters know to be an alcoholic (Brown, 22)¹⁶. Despite the doctor referring to local black farm workers as ‘niggers’ the elderly pair connect and reminisce over Ella's great Scuppernong [a large white grape of the Muscadines family] wines (Brown, 27)¹⁷. The implication being that there is a shared history, some sort of kinship here. Such kinship or understanding is repugnant to Ella's daughters who appear to have escaped the worst of the Jim Crow South.

In *The black dog*: a stray dog appears one day and hangs around eating the widow's own dogs' food. The black dog is playful, over familiar and possibly sinister. He is an

¹⁵ Mary Ward Brown, 'The cure'. in *Tongues of flame* by Mary Ward Brown (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), p.21.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 22.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 27.

uncomfortable reminder of homelessness and desperation. The widow asks friends and neighbours for solutions which range from taking him to the housing project as ‘People out there wanted anything free...’ (Brown, 138)¹⁸, to taking him to the pound or shooting him (Brown, 138-139).¹⁹. Eventually, the dog is injured by a neighbour’s shot gun. Later the widow finds the dog dead at the side of the road. He seems to be a harbinger but of what people are not too sure.

My novel, a literary experiment, is in dialogue with Tartt and Brown’s work. By conducting close textual reading of Tartt and Brown I excavated both the Gothic and Southern Gothic elements illuminated above. And this gave me a better awareness of my chosen field. Once I had my typology I redrafted my novel to include them all. Fortunately, some elements were already present; elements that had bubbled up from my unconscious. But would I be able to create a credible Southern Gothic narrative? Or would it just become a pastiche or ersatz Southern fried melodrama?

Three kids and a dead dog is a children’s adventure set in the backwoods of Georgia where three children find mummified foetuses in the basement of a ruined plantation house. More close reading was needed of the Southern writers and rereading of my own text too. For example:

‘As they [nest of snakes] burned, they’d made a hideous crackling noise, one of the worst noises Harriet had ever heard. All the rest of that winter and most of the spring there’d been a small pile of greasy ash and blackened vertebra in the spot’ (Tartt, 147)²⁰.

¹⁸ Mary Ward Brown, ‘The black dog’. in *Tongues of flame* by Mary Ward Brown (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), p. 138.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 138-139.

²⁰ Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p.147.

The nest of snakes and the sound of them burning create a dreadful atmosphere and the fact that the pile of detritus hangs around for a long time fills us with a sense of Gothic foreboding. Some Gothic foreboding in my novel:

‘Thunder crossed the plantation. Waker lowered her head and hurried forward. Dealer barked at the sky. Waker blinked the rain out of her eyes as they reached the sagging porch’ (Webb, 45)²¹.

In *Three kids and a dead dog* I included the usual Gothic tropes: stormy weather; a naïve hero approaching a creepy house with a sagging porch, no doubt hiding a dark secret. The house itself feels malevolent, spiteful even. The dog growling adds to our sense of dread. And guillotine-like windows foreshadow danger ahead: ‘One prod and the glass would slide down like a guillotine’; so far, so Gothic. However, to push my novel into the Southern Gothic I had to be very clear about such elements in Tartt et al to better refine my prose.

‘He [Harriet’s older nine year old brother Robin] was hanging by the neck from a piece of rope, slung over a low branch of the black-tupelo that stood near the overgrown privet hedge between Charlotte’s house and Mrs Fountain’s; and he was dead. The toes of his limp tennis shoes dangled six inches above the grass. The cat, Weenie, was sprawled barrel-legged on his stomach atop a branch, batting, with a deft, feinting paw, at Robin’s copper-red hair, which ruffled and glinted in the breeze and which was the only thing about his that was the right colour any more’ (Tartt, 13)²².

With the snakes we have something creepy. The sort of sight one might be confronted with staying in an old castle in the Transylvanian mountains, a naïve young tourist exploring the battlements and coming upon an old crone ‘clearing up’. However, the realist writing describing a nine year old child hanging from a tree takes us into the

²¹ Elisa Marcella Webb, ‘Three kids and a dead dog’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Kingston University, 2020), p.45.

²² Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p.13.

macabre, a long way from the velvet and vampires of the traditional Gothic. We have realism details: the black-tupelo tree which also places us in the Southern landscape, alongside the mundane privet hedge. The fact that Robin's limp tennis shoes dangled only six inches above the ground is terrible. Does this mean at a stretch he could have saved himself? And then there's the cat, a macabre image, and a grotesque gesture: idly playing with the dead boy's hair.

Tartt's *The little friend* became my novel's ancestor at the base of my literary influences' family tree. I posit my novel is not a derivative pastiche but more a step-daughter. And I stumbled upon the (possible) ancestor of *The little friend* in my extensive reading of the South. Tartt's novel is not derivative but maybe a daughter of a short story by Dorothy Allison.

Allison (a native of South Carolina) does something very similar to Tartt in her short story *River of names* (originally published in 1983 but re-appearing in the anthology *Cowboys, Indians and commuters. The Penguin book of new American voices*, 1994). The story concerns a picnic at a family farm, the only time the narrator notes the whole family had ever gathered. Eight year old cousin Tommy is found hanging in the 'sunlit heights of the barn' (Allison, 13)²³. Fast forward into the future or into now and the narrator spins folksy tales for her lover about her childhood, dressed up to avoid the hardscrabble poverty, domestic violence and addiction. There is also a list of cousins lost to suicide, murder, careless driving and sexual assaults. The narrator can never tell her lover the truth; they live with flimsy fairy tales between them. We do not find out what happened to Tommy. He serves as an introduction to this Southern Gothic maelstrom.

²³ Dorothy Allison, 'River of names'. in *Cowboys, Indians and commuters. The Penguin book of new American voices* (ed). by Jay McInerney (London: Viking, 1994), p.13.

‘[At a picnic at her aunt’s farm] Billie ran right through the open [barn] doors and out again, but I stopped, caught by a shadow moving over me. My cousin, Tommy, eight years old as I was, swung in the sunlight with his face as black as his shoes – the rope around his neck pulled up into the sunlit heights of the barn, fascinating, horrible’ (Allison, 13)²⁴.

It is germane that this short story, appeared in the same anthology as Tartt’s: *Sleepytown* (1992), possibly influencing (consciously or unconsciously) Tartt’s narrative of the mysterious hanging in *The little friend*. I also have included several literary extracts from Tartt to illustrate how she has recycled or developed her short story into a novel. The similarities are too many to be mere coincidence. Some may argue this is a writer plagiarising themselves, and possibly Allison’s work too. But for me the extracts show a writer’s journey, development and thinking made explicit, which is a hard thing to illustrate as much of our creative work takes place in our minds; unless logged in a collage say.

Sleepytown also reads like the germ for the protagonist Harriet in *The little friend* both in terms of how the main *Sleepytown* character is described and her delirium while unwell. The patrician aunt in *The little friend* is the great-grandfather in *Sleepytown*. The great-grandfather is a Victorian character observed by the 10 year old narrator. The grand old family house has been destroyed by a fire. The great-grandfather rants about how rubbing alcohol would have saved Confederate soldiers whose blisters turned into septic poisoning. He constantly doses himself with antibiotics, while dosing the child narrator with codeine cough syrup and whiskey to the point that she frequently becomes delirious. Later the narrator gets stoned with her older cousin while her aunt and uncle collect said cousin from college and reads Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). Some of the similarities area as follows: *Sleepytown*:

²⁴ Ibid, p.13.

Her mother was: skittish and immature (Tartt, 228)²⁵ and her father was: dashing and feckless (Tartt, 228)²⁶. There was a 'bevy' of great-aunts (Tartt, 228)²⁷.

She became a “sickly” child (Tartt, 229)²⁸ dosed up with blackstrap molasses, glasses of whiskey, a mysterious liquorice-flavoured medicine and ‘some red stuff’ which the narrator later realises was codeine cough syrup. So: ‘[...] I spent nearly two years of my childhood submerged in a pretty powerfully altered state of consciousness’ (Tartt, 230)²⁹.

And a kind of delirium: ‘[...] in the sleepy glow of the gas heater, I would catch a glimpse of Huck and Tom’s campfire, out on their sandbar in the Mississippi’ (Tartt, 231)³⁰.

‘Our neighbourhood was full of mimosa trees...’ (Tartt, 231)³¹.

And of course the [black] maid Cleo (Tartt, 231)³². Nightmares of snakes and devil worship ‘[...] which I knew all about from the maid...’ (Tartt, 236)³³.

The great-grandfather is convinced the child narrator will not live to see morning and often states this standing in the doorway, when probably the child’s illness has been prolonged by the cocktail of hallucinogenic home remedies.

The little friend

‘[...] the Cleves loved to recount among themselves even the minor events of their family history...’ (Tartt, 3)³⁴.

‘[...] the babble of her aunts’ (Tartt, 4)³⁵.

²⁵ Donna Tartt, ‘Sleepytown’. in *Cowboys, Indians and commuters. The Penguin book of new American voices* (ed). by Jay McInerney (London: Viking, 1994), p. 228.

²⁶ Ibid, p.228.

²⁷ Ibid, p.228.

²⁸ Ibid, p.229.

²⁹ Ibid, p.230.

³⁰ Ibid, p.231.

³¹ Ibid, p.231.

³² Ibid, p.231.

³³ Ibid, p. 236.

³⁴ Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p.3.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

Ida Rhew is referred to as ‘the housekeeper’ (Tartt, 5)³⁶. After Robin’s death the mother withdraws into pills and her bedroom, the father Dix moves to Nashville, Tennessee to start over with a party lifestyle without feeling guilty (Tartt, 22)³⁷. Sister Allison is a vague young woman: pretty but almost completely disconnected from anything around her (Tartt, 22)³⁸. Snakes feature as does a prolonged delirium after Harriet survives falling into the dank stagnant water tower and fighting Danny Ratliff off.

The Gothic dread in *The little friend* and *River of names* morphs into the macabre and grotesque in these extracts in a realistic even banal way. It is worth looking again at the similarities between *The little friend* and *River of names*:

The little friend

‘He was hanging by the neck from a piece of rope, slung over a low branch of the black-tupelo that stood near the overgrown privet hedge between Charlotte’s house and Mrs Fountain’s; and he was dead. The toes of his limp tennis shoes dangled six inches above the grass. The cat, Weenie, was sprawled barrel-legged on his stomach atop a branch, batting, with a deft, feinting paw, at Robin’s copper-red hair, which ruffled and glinted in the breeze and which was the only thing about him that was the right colour any more’ (Tartt, 13)³⁹.

River of names

‘Billie ran right through the open doors and out again, but I stopped, caught by something moving over me. My cousin, Tommy, eight years old as I was, swung in the sunlight with his face as black as his shoes – the rope around his neck pulled up into the sunlit heights of the barn, fascinating, horrible’ (Allison, 13)⁴⁰.

Both start with this event, though for Allison it is the first paragraph whereas for Tartt it is the penultimate paragraph in the prologue. In both a child of 8 and 9 has been

³⁶ Ibid, p. 5.

³⁷ Ibid, p.22.

³⁸ Ibid, p.22.

³⁹ Ibid, p.13.

⁴⁰ Dorothy Allison, ‘River of names’. in *Cowboys, Indians and commuters. The Penguin book of new American voices* (ed). by Jay McInerney (London: Viking, 1994), p.13.

hanged to death: grotesque and macabre. Neither author lets the reader know how or why it happened, or who did it. The hangings almost feel like part of the Southern landscape, and when we consider the history of Jim Crow and lynching they are. Although, these are white children not black. The deaths feel like harbingers of what is to come and in both stories there is a catalogue of Southern misery. And because we do not find out what ‘really happened’, no-one goes to jail and there is no neat resolution or closure for the reader. The narrator in *River of names* and the protagonist in *The little friend* are never let off the hook. We can never entirely switch off and let these stories go; part of us is left to wander around the Cleves’ garden and the farm barn. Maybe the reader has been left to haunt the landscape long after the author and the characters have moved on. On the website *Goodreads*⁴¹ there is a lively thread of readers debating, arguing and ‘giving evidence’ to clear up the mystery of who killed Tarrt’s Robin.

In my writing I move my characters from Gothic gloom towards the Southern idiom and Southern Gothic’s macabre and grotesque in particular: words were scraped into the battered wood wall of the ruined house Coeur D’Alene or Ellen’s heart. Waker, my protagonist, begins to read. Bible verses have been chosen and repurposed for what lies in the basement: still born babies and fetuses ‘liberated’ from local research laboratory HASL. Experiments or ‘research’ was carried out without consent from poor white and especially poor black family fetuses, still-born babies and the victims of infanticide that transgressed Jim Crow laws and social rules against ‘miscegenation’.

I identified the key Gothic, Southern Gothic and Southern style in Tarrt, Brown and Allison to better build my text as a credible Southern Gothic novel. In short, I needed to

⁴¹ Goodreads, *Goodreads: the little friend question* (2020) <<https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/676664-who-did-it>> [accessed 20 December 2020].

redraft my novel to include a sharper understanding or specific inclusion of the macabre and grotesque alongside other Southern markers of culture, landscape and language. And I needed and found an awareness of my new literary heritage or genealogy enabling me to understand where my work would sit among my ‘ancestor’s’ work. In the next chapter I will consider the grotesque in more detail illustrating that it may not be as horrible as it initially appears to be.

4 Southern Gothic grotesque beyond the negative stereotypes

‘Southern Gothic thrives on the theme of deformity. Critic Peggy Bailey suggests that grotesque characters “may be the most visible signs of the Southern Gothic” (Marshall, 13)⁴². I argue that ‘grotesque events’ are also key to Southern Gothic, and grotesque events that take place outside, often in daylight: the child hanging in *The little friend* and *River of names* for example. However, ‘While scenes of violence committed by crippled, maimed, or otherwise disabled characters add further to the grotesque, such scenes are typically portrayed as the reasonable result of the mistreatment borne by the disabled characters at the hands of the “normal” characters’ (Marshall, 14)⁴³.

The second part of this statement is important. A character or place may look horrible to the outsider but through the Southern Gothic genre we learn that the character or place has been belittled, abused and disabled by the society around them. This genre gives me scope to write about the grotesque in a way that ‘colours in’ humanity rather than merely illustrating a horror side-show. For example, Cousin Velvet, in *Three kids and a dead dog* reminds me of patients I have met at my local mental hospital, (Springfield University Hospital in South London) that often appear deranged and scary but on closer conversation have a purpose and coherence in their world view, even when life gets away from them (us) sometimes.

Though, Southern Gothic writers have been criticised for gratuitous grotesque. Tartt’s *The little friend* has been criticised for displaying a bunch of ‘misshapen’ and damaged characters as clichés and stereotypes: ‘Throughout the novel, Danny Ratliff is

⁴² Bridget M. Marshall, ‘Defining Southern Gothic’. in *Southern Gothic literature* (ed). by Jay Ellis (Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013). p.13.

⁴³ Ibid, p.14.

perceived—and typically behaves—as a stereotype’ (Clough, 32)⁴⁴. According to John Freeman reviewing *The little friend* for the Wall Street Journal in 2002 ‘[Southern Gothic here] has become a carnival of stereotypes’ (Freeman)⁴⁵.

For example:

Hely tells Harriet about the Reptile Playland on the old highway, near something called the Petrified Forest:

“‘The man there is scary. He’s got tattoos of snakes all up and down his arms.’ And scars, too, like he’d been bitten plenty of times, Hely had noticed while he was filling up the tank [it is attached to a gas station]. And no teeth, and no dentures, either—which had given his grin a soft, horrible, snake-like quality. Worst of all, a boa constrictor had been twined around his neck: want to pet him son? he’d said, leaning into the car, pinning Hely with his flat, sun-dazzled eyes’ (Tartt, 147-148)⁴⁶.

It is a balancing act for a writer. Such characters and places do exist, but they also echo negative stereotypes that hurt those at the bottom of society and the income scale. Should we write them? If I accept that the grotesque is a key marker of the Southern Gothic, then as a writer I need to include it in my prose or at least use it as a filter or style. Is this issue resolved by the writer’s intentions and/or the textual ‘result’? My research, my reading of the South, bred more problems than answers at this stage. Is it possible to escape the South (stereotype) and write the South at the same time? To reflect on these questions and issues and I needed to find another writer who had grappled with the same problems, one who was, like me, not from the South, in order to solve my problem.

⁴⁴ Edward Clough, ‘Poisonous possibilities: telling stories and telling ruins in Donna Tartt’s ‘The little friend’’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 68.3-4 (2015)

<<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/results?vid=3&sid=45520031-bd87-4395-8722->> [accessed 4 January 2018], p.32.

⁴⁵ John Freeman, ‘Review/books: Southern Gothic, smothered in Kudzu’, *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 2002 <<http://ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/docview/accountid=14557>> [accessed 1 September 2017].

⁴⁶ Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), pp.147-148.

Journalist Joan Didion was born and mostly raised in Sacramento, California. She took a summer road trip in 1970 through Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama describing what she found in her book *South and West, from a notebook* (2017). On her drive from New Orleans to Biloxi, Mississippi, Didion became affected by Southern literary expectations via the landscape. As the blurb of the 2017 edition explains: '[she] swims in motel pools that smell of fish, visits an eerily deserted reptile house and drinks gin and tonics with Walker Percy while a storm rages...'. Didion herself wrote: 'The cliché of the lonely road in the South took on a certain meaning here' (Didion, 23)⁴⁷, when they stop at The Reptile House.

'We stood, the five of us, and looked restlessly out into the driving rain, trapped together in the Reptile House. The dust outside was turning to deep mud. Alligators thrashed in a muddy pool a few yards away. A little farther a sign said Snake Pit' (Didion, 24)⁴⁸.

Tattoos, the lack of teeth and the boa constrictor do create a grotesque and possibly a 'typical' Southern image. However, Tartt's fictional images are somewhat validated by Didion actually visiting such a place. The Reptile House with alligators thrashing about before the hapless tourist ends up at the snake pit. This content and style is sometimes dismissed as local colour writing which according to the OED is the characteristic customs or other aspects of a place or period. But the implied meaning is amateur 'scribblers' getting too invested in cherished and amusing details from peculiar neighbourhoods at the expense of good writing or a carnival of stereotypes. Maybe we should delve a little deeper.

⁴⁷ Joan Didion, *South and West, from a notebook* (UK: 4th Estate, 2017), p. 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.24.

By highlighting the existence and reality of extreme poverty in America today, particularly the rural South, such images summon up an American fear of poverty. Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Isabel Wilkerson write about the dangers of living in a rich nation with massively inadequate safety-nets for millions of Americans. These literary characters and real people are very poor. They cannot afford good dental care and have to hustle on the margins, trying to find various ingenious ways to eat and make rent. It is easier to see such characters and people below the poverty line as deserving their situation, earning their misfortune rather than enterprising survivors battling structural inequalities. There is an ambivalence and cognitive dissonance. For example: J.D. Vance in his autobiography *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) shows some sympathy for his larger than life Appalachian hill folk family. He writes: ‘The statistics tell you that kids like me face a grim future—that if they’re unlucky, they’ll die of a heroin overdose, as happened to dozens in my small hometown just last year’ (Vance, 2)⁴⁹. However, Vance appears to blame his kin for their poverty. ‘I nearly gave in to the deep anger and resentment harboured by everyone around me’ (Vance, 2)⁵⁰. Going into the army enabled him to apply and afford college. Once on this path he found out that it was better to apply to an Ivy League college where bursaries make the fees a lot more affordable and accessible than the local state college. However, he leaves facts like this hanging in a neutral space. Perhaps, prompting the reader to conclude that other hill folk could have made the same effort and escaped too. But many local teenagers and their families lack the necessary cultural capital therefore they assume such prizes are beyond their reach. Their apparent apathy and ‘giving in’ to anger and resentment may also result from a realistic assessment of what is

⁴⁹ J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly elegy, a memoir of a family and culture in crisis* (London: William Collins, 2016), p.2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.2.

possible for them. The cards are stacked against them at every level, as outlined by Obama, Wilkerson and even Vance himself.

In reading the South to build my awareness and knowledge of the South, and to earn my Southern writing credits, I was mindful of reading the South as widely as possible. In order to create something recognisably Southern, not a carnival of clichés and stereotypes, I created well rounded characters with integrity to inhabit the Southern Gothic landscape. They affect the landscape and are affected by it. Thus my ‘white trash’ characters Stills and his kin are not amoral criminals. They are not hillbilly harbingers but generous survivors outside of mainstream America. They have less in common with Tartt’s Ratliffs and more in common with Lewis Nordan’s ‘grotesque’ characters in *The sharpshooter blues* (1995), where a ‘grotesque’ community comes together to support a father who has lost his only son Hydro who had special needs but was pretty damn shrewd. In my novel the affluent and good-looking Clay jokes about an old school acquaintance who has supposedly given birth to conjoined twins. However, the real ‘monster’ is Clay, superficially charming but spoilt and abusive when one gets to know him. I was playing around or experimenting with Southern Gothic. Clay references and sends up the grotesque expectations in Southern Gothic; while being a grotesque himself. My readers do not find out if said conjoined twins exist. Maybe they are just another tall Southern tale.

Tall tales are something else Southern culture is known for according to the *Bitter Southerner* podcast: ‘We Are Storytellers, the South lives and dies by its stories — and the writers who tell them’ (Chuck Reece)⁵¹. I decided to include other grotesque tall tales such

⁵¹ *Bitter Southerner podcast: we are storytellers* (USA: Bitter Southern Magazine, 2018) <<https://bittersoutherner.com/bitter-southerner-podcast-season-one/episode-six>> [Podcast].

as when the character Halo tells the story of greedy Simper eating her children in the swamp in order to survive the tail end of the Civil War and Sherman's March to the Sea.

To conclude the grotesque is a defining feature of Southern Gothic, examples of which are to be found in Southern Gothic literature and in non-fiction texts that tell about the South. As a writer attempting a Southern Gothic novel I needed to consider the following: what does the Southern Gothic allow me to do as a writer? Why this genre? How do I navigate the grotesque to create a novel that does not belittle those at the bottom of society? People and characters whose poverty often makes them, in popular culture at least, the butt of the joke or the sinister backwoods' horror staple. I attempted to write well rounded characters rather than stereotypes. However, my characters inhabit an immersive landscape that shapes them into very different people to the people they would have been had they been elsewhere. My intention in my novel is to use the grotesque as something to confront taken for granted assumptions. And these characters may be seen as symptoms or manifestation of the Southscape. I will now consider the macabre.

5 Southern Gothic macabre and regional culture as a tool to organise space

In *The little friend* protagonist Harriet's revenge stealing the king cobra and tipping it over the bridge into the Ratliff's car is payback, in Harriet's view, for Danny Ratliff supposedly killing her brother Robin. This is macabre but makes sense to Harriet, her best friend and enabler Hely, as well as to the reader.

'Despite what came later (tears, a whipping) it remained one of the most satisfying moments of his life. And it was with the same disbelief [...] that Hely watched the five-foot cobra strike the open T-top unevenly, at a diagonal. So that his top-heavy tail slid abruptly inside the Trans Am and pulled the rest of him in after it' (Tartt, 331)⁵².

'A passing truck driver brought her [the toxic matriarch of the red-neck family] in. He had happened to drive along just in time to see the astonishing sight of an old lady staggering on the highway with a king cobra latched onto her shoulder' (Tartt, 333)⁵³.

Here are some more examples of the macabre from Didion's Southern odyssey:

'We ran over three snakes in the hour's drive, one of them a thick black moccasin already dead, twisted across the one lane' (Didion, 20)⁵⁴.

In my novel there is a snake that appears in the flooded trailer, though it is harmless. My giant man-eating catfish is more macabre. Luckily the children survive this to arrive at Doll Island with bags of soggy mummified fetuses. Here, they bump into feral Cousin Velvet, who expects them to help her nail the babies to the trees alongside her battered doll collection as some sort of memorial garden. A macabre moment in a macabre scene, although one that makes sense given Cousin Velvet's mission to give the disrespected

⁵² Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p.331.

⁵³ Ibid, p333.

⁵⁴ Joan Didion, *South and West, from a notebook* (UK: 4th Estate, 2017), p.20.

babies, dumped as detritus when the HASL laboratory was shut down, a decent 'burial' or flun'rul in Gullah. Therefore the jarred babies and the doll collection initially fit the dictionary definition of the macabre: 'comically or repulsively ugly, or distorted and/or shockingly incongruous or inappropriate' but when considered in context and culture here the macabre signals something else: humanity and compassion.

These macabre events and story moments: a five-foot cobra being tipped off a bridge into an open topped car, the truck driver taking an old lady to hospital with said cobra attached to her shoulder; Didion driving over dead snakes create an atmosphere of quotidian macabre and menace: such things are both fantastical and mundane in Southern Gothic. Like the Prince of Darkness character in *The sharpshooter blues*, who acquired his name and status because he apparently rose from the dead as a child and not because he runs the local funeral home. The locals refer to him in this way without irony or fanfare. As a writer I played around with this apparent quotidian acceptance of the macabre. It also illustrates a child's eye view on the world and on problem solving. The children take the view that the foetuses or nephilim have had a bad deal and deserve a respectful 'laying to rest'. They aim to complete Cousin Velvet's noble project. Cairns of jarred dead babies may be macabre but it is also a compassionate solution. The children draw the line at nailing them in the trees alongside Velvet's doll collection, causing the children and the reader to wonder if Velvet perceives a difference between the dolls and the foetuses.

Both the macabre and the grotesque can be seen in Olympia Vernon's novel *Logic* (2004). Vernon is from a small town on the border between Louisiana and Mississippi. She still lives in the South, in New Orleans.

Logic is a 13 year old girl who survived a fall from a tree that may have damaged her brain or maybe she has just withdrawn into an imaginative revision of the

poor and brutal world around her. She has also stopped eating. Her mother wished Logic had not survived and her father has been sexually abusing her. Logic is enmeshed in these Southern Gothic family secrets but manages to trip around her world like an almost otherworldly spirit [my summary].

Vernon's prose is lyrical, poetic and macabre, for example: 'And there on the shelves were the rubies, round cases of perfumed talc, a row of toy soldiers, their faces burned, melted' (Vernon, 30)⁵⁵. Some readers have struggled to follow her novel because it does not follow a traditional narrative or literary realism approach. However, the atmospheric prose takes us into Logic's mind enabling us to see the world from her perspective; a technique used by Faulkner: Benjy in *The sound and the fury* (1995), Lester Ballard in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (2010) and Hydro in Nordan's *The sharpshooter blues*. There is a kinship here. The psychological depth in these Southern narratives allows us to see the character from their grotesque or macabre outsides and then to see (or feel) their interior landscape containing a logic and moral code. There is a coherence and even decency to be found in these 'grotesques' highlighting the fact that it may be society that is lacking and the character is simply playing the hand they have been dealt.

Logic shoots her father after he mocks her for not being able to spell 'heaven' and stating that she is 'retarded' (Vernon, 243)⁵⁶. This may seem a macabre act but remember Logic has also been regularly abused by her father. Surely grounds for action and one of the few options open to Logic? Later Logic wearing her angel's wings jumps off the roof at the end of the novel, probably pregnant with her father's child: "'Logic," he said. "you got your daddy in you"' (Vernon, 241)⁵⁷. Though, this ending may be down-beat it also feels

⁵⁵ Olympia Vernon, *Logic* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p.30.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.243.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 241.

like some sort of escape or liberation. “But Logic. /Logic was not dead. /She could never be” (Vernon, 249)⁵⁸. Again this is one of the few options open to Logic because she is poor and black with no capable guardian or proactive welfare services available.

Not only can we place Vernon’s work on the Southern Gothic family tree but we can pick out specific examples of the macabre. *Logic* starts with everyday realism-style description but it soon tips into something excessive and macabre. ‘In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. [...] Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework’ (O’Connor, 40)⁵⁹. However, in such works I argue this is the implied every day of Southern Gothic. Native born Southerners may claim their reality is not dominated by the macabre and grotesque, as a reaction to such fiction. However, because of the Southern Gothic genre and the Southern canon the South is culturally perceived in such a way. Thus macabre and grotesque elements are highlighted and augmented by those claiming to write the South to distinguish it from Anywhere America. And according to Scott Romine: ‘[...] we are still using regional culture as a tool to organise spaces, to build environments, and to tell stories’ (Romine, 229)⁶⁰. It is apposite to mention his chapter is called *A circular conclusion* because this does feel like a circular argument, though one that is supported by cultural and literary evidence. Romine continued his argument on the relevance and value of narrative: ‘[...] narratives provide in ways that

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.249.

⁵⁹ Flannery O’Connor, ‘Some aspects of the grotesque in Southern fiction’. in *Mystery and manners, occasional prose, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1970), p.40.

⁶⁰ Scott Romine, *The real South: Southern narrative in the age of cultural reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), p.59.

strive to secure identities, cultures, and their locations as real, not fake [...]’ (Romine, 229).⁶¹

The sections below illustrate profuse macabre examples. However, in Southern Gothic the macabre is not present to shock or act as catharsis as it is in the horror genre. Didion uses the macabre here to capture the essence of New Orleans which visitors’ sense but may not be able to articulate. And it is what Flannery O’Connor describes as a writer’s technique to make a point: ‘[...] to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures’ (O’Connor, 34)⁶². Using the macabre and the grotesque is a way of making a point that might be missed if it is too subtle.

‘In New Orleans in June the air is heavy with sex and death, not violent death but death by drowning, suffocation, fever of unknown etiology. The place is physically dark, dark like the negative of a photograph, dark like an X-ray: the atmosphere absorbs its own light, never reflects light but sucks it in until random objects glow with morbid luminescence. The crypts above ground dominate certain vistas. In the hypnotic liquidity of the atmosphere all motion slows into choreography, all people on the street move as if suspended in a precarious emulsion, and there seems only a technical distinction between the quick and the dead’ (Didion, 5-6)⁶³.

In my novel the dog Pearl’s awful death was not written for horror, but to make the point that poor choices, carelessness and meanness lead to terrible injuries that cannot be undone. And shouting is clearly needed, shouting about the South, and indeed the whole of the United States of America. In a well-researched and damning indictment of America today *Caste, the lies that divide us* (2020) Wilkerson draws large and startling figures⁶⁴. Her book is almost ‘idiot proof’. No one could misunderstand the situation after reading it. She

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Flannery O’Connor, ‘The fiction writer and his country’. in *Mystery and manners, occasional prose, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1970), p.34.

⁶³ Joan Didion, *South and West, from a notebook* (UK: 4th Estate, 2017), pp.5-6.

⁶⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste, the lies that divide us* (UK: Allen Lane, 2020).

is shouting about the huge inequalities and unfairness that blight black American lives today. Jim Crow is alive and well. One of the many disturbing things to consider, and there are many recently highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement, is that O'Connor's essay was published in 1970 and *Caste* in 2020. And still shouting and action is needed. The Southern Gothic has a social, cultural and political component. Although, much of this is beyond the scope of this PhD thesis, as a Southern Gothic writer I used the macabre to reference the politics and culture of lynching. Wilkerson and O'Connor and the macabre and the grotesque provide useful definitions, context and tools for my project. And as a writer I had to know my field well in order to write it. My characters were affected and shaped by *this* Southern context. Such conclusions take me a long way from the agrarian and neo-agrarian ideals associated with the Southern literary canon which has long been nostalgic for a lost romantic rural idyll of contented rusticity. I will next add Robert Antoni's compassionate writing of the macabre to illustrate that the macabre may not where readers' horror reaction should be.

6 Embracing the humane possibilities of the macabre with Robert Antoni

It was initially difficult to find Tartt's short piece *Sleepytown*. Although, as already mentioned I did eventually find a copy in the anthology: *Cowboys, Indians and commuters*. Her short story only seemed to exist in the print copy of this anthology. It had disappeared online. It was originally published in *Harper's magazine* in 1992⁶⁵. However, it was difficult to find an actual copy of the original story. Tartt first published it as memoir but later suggested it was fiction, possibly because having a maid who was referred to mostly as *the maid* rather than by her name: Cleo, did not reflect well on the author. Though, this 'confusion' could also be attributed to the cult of nativism that encourages the gatekeeping belief that all Southern writing is somehow autobiographical. In order to write the South well one must draw on one's own lived experience. Tartt's tale may well be fiction but it was initially sold to *Harper's* readers as 'real life'.

I read the rest of the anthology for an American context; its subtitle was *The Penguin book of new American voices* in order to gain an overview of my wider adopted family. Here I stumbled across Allison's *River of names* which led me (as already outlined) to some genealogical speculation on links or kinship between Tartt's and Allison's writing. The anthology also contained Robert Antoni's macabre short story *Granny Myna tells of the child* (1991). Antoni's story was set in his native Trinidad. Although, Antoni is not a writer of the Southern states his handling of the macabre was pivotal for me as a writer. His work inspired me to use the macabre as an element without being inhibited by the disturbing

⁶⁵ Donna Tartt, 'Sleepytown, a Southern Gothic childhood, with codeine', *Harper's magazine*, July 1992 <<https://harpers.org/archive/1992/07/sleepytown/>> [accessed 1 October 2019].

nature of its content. His short story starts with a 12 year old narrator struggling to carry a preserve jar to the Maraval swamp. He is on a mission from his Granny Myna who has just died. The jar contains a child who is supposedly half-man, half-frog; referred to as the crapo or frog child. A doctor examined the child suggesting anencephaly. However, the white English doctor lacked credibility because he had only learned his trade from books. Uncle Olly who has more status within the family as a bit of a scientist of ‘bones and rocks’ (Antoni, 74)⁶⁶ ‘[...] proves without any questions that the child is a frog, and he do have a brain...’ (Antoni, 74)⁶⁷. However, Uncle Olly achieves this by cutting the child’s brain out to compare it to a swamp frog. He then gets very excited and decides to preserve the child in a jar of seawater for further dissections. He has not considered the child or the child’s father in his plans. More macabre events ensue. Myrna suddenly finds herself pushing the still live baby in a pot of boiling water. And later ordering the child to be dug up from the family plot in the cemetery and returned to the swamp; because she does not want to be buried next to the ‘crapochild’ (Antoni, 79)⁶⁸. The narrator digs the jar up, and opens the bottle at the swamp where the [still alive] frog child swims away disappearing: ‘[...] into a clump of quiet mangrove banyans’ (Antoni, 85)⁶⁹.

My novel already contained jarred fetuses called nephilim. Thus, this made Antoni’s and my work step cousins. My novel supervisor, after reading a draft emailed ‘there’s some great atmosphere and description here, but it also feels as though we spend a bit too much time with the dead Pearl, the rotting nephilim etc. There’s so much yuck...’ (Miller)⁷⁰. I

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.74.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.74.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.79.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 85.

⁷⁰ James Miller, ‘Apologies and catch up’, *PhD supervisor feedback email on good draft of my novel*, <elisa.webb101@gmail.com> [accessed 4 October 2020].

initially considered the feedback and wondered if I had gone too far? After all I was not writing horror. However, reading Antoni's story made me think again. Why not push the story and the description as far as I could, to create a macabre Southern Gothic journey for my readers? If you have a dead dog that has been run over (its entrails cooking in the sun and then rotting in the rain) it is going to be horrible for the children trying to paddle downstream to bury it. It may be relentless but it is also honest. Faulkner in *As I lay dying* (2004) did not sanitise the macabre.

Granny Myna tells of the child is both grotesque and macabre. It is kin to the Southern Gothic: the crapchild and the killing of said child (being pushed into boiling water like a crab) and his dissection, for example. And there is also something matter of fact, even quotidian, about the events. The grandmother at the end of her life is more concerned with Catholic mysticism and dying on a particular day than the fact she killed her husband's child. It is left up to the readers to have a conscience. It feels like a happy ending when the crapchild swims off into the swamp after being liberated from his grave and 'obzockee' (lopsided or awkward in Caribbean English) pickling jar. It is a fairy tale or allegory and 'real life' too. Antoni handles the macabre with deft skill. I was inspired, pleased and dismayed to read this story. I had my idea for the jarred nephilim or foetuses *before* I read about the crapchild and do not want my readers to think otherwise. However, this story was significant encouraging me to carry on with my macabre explorations as a literary experiment, despite the fact they may horrify those used to reading more conventional and sanitary fiction. It also helped me refine my direction in the text about foetuses and dead babies taken with little regard to said children (or their parents) and used as exhibits for 'medical research' and as side-show attractions. My research led me to photographs

and postcards of 'jolly' (white) med-students posing with cadavers of often black corpses used for medical training and dissection *without* their family's consent or even knowledge⁷¹. Such children preserved in jars often with profound disabilities were someone's scrap of star dust and deserved the best of us not the worst. Cousin Velvet feels the same and tries to honour these children. She is trying to put something right. My characters and my readers will have to overcome their squeamishness. However, after spending considerable time mastering the grotesque and the macabre my next task was to master the place.

⁷¹ CVLT NATION Website, *Lived for others, was killed for us... old medical dissection photos* (2014) <<https://www.cvltnation.com/lived-for-others-was-killed-for-us-old-medical-dissection-photos/>> [accessed 1 June 2019].

7 How to travel without travelling

My plan was to write a Southern Gothic novel using the macabre and grotesque as key story elements alongside the usual suspects or Gothic tropes. However, I hit an obstacle. As a part-time self-funded PhD student, working with two children I did not have the funds to visit the American South. And the Covid-19 pandemic precluded travel. How could I write a credible and authentic Southern Gothic novel? My solution, or experiment, may serve as a method for other writers writing a place they have not been, or cannot go. I discovered several writers who gave me some notion about how this might be achieved.

Pierre Bayard's book *How to talk about places you've never been* (2016) is all about writers who have been armchair travellers. Bayard found many examples surprising and even iconoclastic. For example, the travelogues by 'explorer' Marco Polo (1254-1324) used facts and exotic stories, including unicorns and griffins, which he knew his readers expected of fantastical places. According to Frances Wood, Polo got no further than a family bar in Constantinople where he learned from travellers drinking and passing through (Bayard, 12)⁷².

'Marco Polo's accounts functioned equally well in his day because they corresponded to an expectation and belonged within a collective imagination where no one was surprised to come across dog-headed men in their readings. And they continue to be received today as credible documents, even though they seem to have been infiltrated by imaginary beings and fantasies' (Bayard, 13-14)⁷³.

There is shrewdness at work in such writing. Polo learned about the world he intended to write about and added his imagination and creativity. His travelogue still had

⁷² Pierre Bayard, *How to talk about places you've never been* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p.12.

⁷³ *Ibid*, pp.13-14.

to work within the paradigm of the expected because he was writing about exotic far-flung places he had to include the weird and wonderful.

The writer Jules Verne (1828-1905) actually advised his readers to travel without leaving their ship's cabins (Bayard, 16)⁷⁴. And François-René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand (c. 1791) and more recently Jayson Blair (c.2003) both moved aspects of the landscape around to better suit the 'truth', essence and convenience of their narratives and writing careers. Bayard concludes that these writers were able to make places plausible and that they revealed a different kind of truth (Bayard, xiv-xv)⁷⁵. This is a key point: creative writing and even travelogues are not documentaries. Realism writing is not a documentary either. When my novel supervisor pointed out it is not possible to fly directly to Savannah airport (GA) from London Heathrow I argued that if I described a long journey taking my characters through Dulles airport (VA) this would not serve my novel. It would take the story into a different arena and break the Southern spell.

'[...] a particular image of a place means making sense of reality by **cutting it up and [re] organizing it**. Choosing to describe a particular image from a vast array of possibilities offered by a space cannot be done without linking that space to a discourse that gives it meaning and integrates it into the greater unity of a reflection or vision (Bayard, 26)⁷⁶. My italics.

As a writer I was editing places, because the place must serve the narrative and reflect the story. Thus, my characters get straight to Savannah airport and the South. In 2011 I visited Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina on a two week family holiday, coinciding coincidentally with the American Civil War Sesquicentennial. We had a connecting flight via Dulles airport and found ourselves corralled along endless carpeted

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 16.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. xiv-xv.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 26.

corridors. The only food for sale was giant pretzels, which did make it into my novel. However, it was a dystopian rather than a Southern Gothic experience. Thus, with actual travel, according to Bayard, there is a risk of getting lost in the details. A writer can become too pedantic and lose sight of the story goals. At writers' workshops I have often seen writers criticised *not* for the standard of their craft *but because* one of the assembled has been to/lived in X. Such people get very upset if a writer shortens a distance or adds an extra café to build a scene. Such pedantry misses the point of fiction and good storytelling. However, I have also witnessed heated arguments where a writer has got something completely awry, or inauthentic, making the 'text place' unbelievable and scuppering the story. Writing place is a balance somewhere between these two poles.

Bayard recommends doing what Verne's fictional character Phileas Fogg did in *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873). The writer or traveller is advised to stay in their cabin for the entire journey because this will highlight the importance of imagination and reflection in one's approach to place. ... '[Fogg] doesn't waste precious time visiting them' (Bayard, 29)⁷⁷. However, Bayard does suggest one needs a reliable informant. This might include reading and Google enabling a writer to travel efficiently by proxy. I took Bayard's advice because I had to and made reading and Google my reliable informants.

Bayard gave me a method and licence to travel without travelling. He also made a useful point about how places are not a fixed reality but malleable: 'We should be wary of seeing the "relation of resemblance" between places and books as a one-way street, as though books resemble the places they describe or recount without the opposite being true' (Bayard, 31)⁷⁸. Therefore writers are shaping places and influencing how they are

⁷⁷ Pierre Bayard, *How to talk about places you've never been* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p.29.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.31.

seen by readers and visitors in future. Literature can transform a place, for example: a rundown town becomes a harbinger for economic decline. Its bleakness becomes an aesthetic filter readers take elsewhere.

[Chateaubriand] believes that he should not focus on details or geographical reality, but that his role is to research the things that might inscribe the place described in a larger dimension, the things that only literature allows us to access by its transformative force' (Bayard, 54).⁷⁹.

Non-travel would appear to be a superior method, allowing the place to pass through our inner selves, based on some research. It is not always clear what research Chateaubriand used. However, I had the advantage of easy access to Google images and websites dedicated to all things Southern. Such artefacts are not neutral but already filtered, selected and inscribed with what the maker thought was Southern. These sources were already inflected with a perception of Southernness, which as a non-Southerner I wanted to absorb.

But is this 'proper research'? Is this even honest? Will this method produce a fake, plastic inauthentic South that nauseates my reader? Miller in an essay for new writers advised: 'If you can, you need to walk around the place where your novel is set as much as possible. Take your time. Sit in cafes, observe and listen. Absorb. Try to notice things [...] Scout out locations as if you were going to make a movie. [...] Photograph everything' (Miller in Royle, 133).⁸⁰. This good advice is qualified with: *if you can*. Miller goes on to explain that: 'Many of [your story] locations will exist *first* in your imagination' (Miller in Royle, 133).⁸¹. Italics mine. This was initially worrying. I could not physically go and absorb

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 54.

⁸⁰ James Miller, 'The importance of place and setting'. in Nicholas Royle, (ed). *The art of the novel* (UK: Salt, 2015), p.133.

⁸¹ Ibid, p.133.

the South. However, I did have a battered plantation house, a field, a barn, a road alongside woods, a river and a rotting jetty *in my mind* before I scouted for my location. Miller advised writers to find the locations in ‘real life’ to overcome where one’s imagination ‘gets things wrong’. Miller flew to Atlanta, Georgia to research his second novel *Sunshine state* (2010) ‘Seeing the buildings showed me how much my imagination got wrong...’ (Miller in Royle, 135).⁸² which led to some re-writing. I was not in the position to be able to do this. However, I could scout out locations online and build a scrapbook collage of photographs for my story world. I was travelling via the internet, Google was my reliable-ish informant. Although, I did recognise I might miss something that could only be discovered by walking around the South, following Miller’s advice.

And I was well aware that I was using or borrowing the method of disgraced New York Times journalist Jayson Blair. Blair imploded with stress and began writing ‘drunk and high’ without bothering to leave his apartment (Blair in Bayard, 83).⁸³ Although, according to Bayard: ‘[He did show] authentic documentary research and a real concern for accuracy’ (Bayard, 85).⁸⁴

‘Jayson Blair paid attention to detail—as much to the places, as the buildings, as the people...’ (Bayard, 85).⁸⁵ And: ‘Sometimes he even added details when they seemed necessary to bolster the impression of authenticity’ (Bayard, 87).⁸⁶

‘[...] he was keen to give the reader—at the risk of placing tobacco fields beneath the windows of one of his interviewees if he deems it necessary—a particular impression, one that takes precedence over geographical correctness’ (Bayard, 87-88).⁸⁷

⁸² Ibid, p.135.

⁸³ Blair in Pierre Bayard, *How to talk about places you’ve never been* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 83.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.85.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.85.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.87.

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp.87-88.

The tobacco fields are important. They give the reader an instant picture of the South. They take us back to Jim Crow inequality and share cropping. The interviewee may in fact live on the edge of a generic cinderblock suburb, houses which could be anywhere in America. But this dilutes the power of the writer's intention and the story being told. There were tobacco fields somewhere nearby. As Bayard concludes:

'Literary truth aims for something else, and the imaginary realms it provides access to do not require those describing them to literally go there. It requires less of a literal faithfulness to the real than a desire to produce a certain affective experience, to find the ways to bring it to life inside, and then, something that is difficult in another way, to share it with the reader' (Bayard, 90)⁸⁸.

Bayard goes on to include time too, stating that the 'real writer' creates places out of fragments in defiance of chronology (Bayard, 142)⁸⁹, entering the dimension of the spirit of the place (Bayard, 155)⁹⁰. This was useful validation for my writing as this was how I had instinctively written my novel. I now had some support or at least an explanation or description of my method. Blair used the same method. Though, because his articles were supposed to be news' journalism he came a cropper. '[...] I watched the event on television [...]' (Blair, 198)⁹¹, rather than actually going in person. He added that: 'Writing off of television was not an odd occurrence at *The [New York] Times*' (Blair, 198)⁹². Reporters would tune into New York 1 or C-SPAN coverage. What is controversial is that Blair and the newspaper gave the misleading impression that reporters and journalists were actually at these events. Blair describes eventually drifting into psychosis and losing

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.90.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.142.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.155.

⁹¹ Jayson Blair, *Burning down my master's house* (California: New Millennium Entertainment, 2004), p.198.

⁹² Ibid, p.198.

touch with any reality. His own book *Burning down my masters' house, my life at the New York Times* is written as a confession by a man in need of redemption, an apology for his writing methods.

However, *The New York Times* itself used a sort of travel without travelling method. It had a rule that if the reporter went to the place covered they could put their dateline on it. Their readers were led to believe the journalist was bodily present at the whole event reporting as the story unfolded. But the journalists were often just stepping off a train in the middle of the night in X and then stepping right back on, according to Blair. The reporting was probably an authentic expression of the news events in said place. After all you do not need to witness a stabbing to know it is a terrible event that the police are investigating. Research, interviews and articles could be written elsewhere as long as the reporter (for veracity's sake) went to the place, even if it was on the red-eye and back, with barely a step out at the station.

Blair's book starts with: 'I lied and I lied-and then I lied some more. I lied about where I had been [...] they were complete fantasies, embellished down to the tiniest detail' (Blair, 1)⁹³. Why does this matter? There is obviously an ethical argument to be made about journalistic investigative integrity affecting readers' faith in the news; especially in an era of fake news and 'alternative facts'. But that is beyond the scope of this PhD. Though, as someone who makes things up for a living I am interested in Blair's process. Does his writing and my writing lack authenticity, authority and ownership because we have not been there? Is it not all a creative process whereby something gets turned into a story? And if the story resonates with the reader and its location is believably 'real' then this

⁹³ Ibid, p.1.

becomes good fiction. Writing a novel is not the same as writing a Wikipedia page. If we lay Blair's articles alongside other newspaper articles on a particular topic it may be possible that his were more accurate and affecting than those written at the event. Assuming the other articles were written at the event. Blair was following in the tradition of Polo and Chateaubriand. Although, lying is unpalatable and disrespectful, as a fiction writer it is all lying after all.

Upon reaching this stage in my research I gave a short paper at Kingston University on 'a crisis of mimesis' stating at the start I was a liar. As Miller pointed out in his essay *The importance of place and setting* (2015) 'Novelists are all liars and thieves: the important thing is that the lies we tell are convincing and the details we steal to build our fictional worlds are the right ones' (Miller in Royle, 132)⁹⁴. I am a storyteller, a legender, a liar. However, as an outsider and non-native of the American South I needed to carefully find and curate the right details in order to write a convincing Southern Gothic novel. Hence I had to delve into academic thinking about the South to try to understand what the South was and is and what it is not. My intention was to borrow rather than steal from these academic perspectives.

'It is a truth universally acknowledged among Southern literary scholars that "the South" and "Southern literature" have [until now] been characterized by a "sense of place", posits Martyn Bone. So far so good, this statement initially confirmed my thinking and research. However, 'What seems fairly clear is that the [modernist] model of Southern fiction as a regional literature rooted in fixed ideas of place, community, and history has

⁹⁴ James Miller, 'The importance of place and setting'. in Nicholas Royle, (ed). *The art of the novel* (UK: Salt, 2015), p.132.

reached the end of the line' (Bone, vii)⁹⁵. Where does this leave my practice-based PhD, a creative process inventing and interrogating Southern Gothic fiction by attempting to create an authentic Southern Gothic novel, if place as a key marker was out of date? 'What sort of aesthetic form should new authors strive for as the most authentic, if writers are ethically obliged to acknowledge the fundamental fraudulence of precisely these terms?' (Chadd, 231)⁹⁶. Is my research journey through regional literature rooted in fixed ideas of place, community, and history a foundation or just a swamp of worn out clichés? Though, if as Clare Chadd suggests the region: '[c]onsist of the various discourses and mythologies that work collectively to form a believable impression of a place' (Chadd, 237)⁹⁷, then my wading through 'Southern' discourses and mythologies is a credible foundation after all. And according to Romine 'The Real South [...] becomes the real South through the intervention of narrative' (Romine, 9)⁹⁸. And if: '[...] authenticity resides in the convincingness of the performance, rather than in the integrity of the reporter or the verisimilitude of [the] report' (Chadd, 245)⁹⁹, then by creating a convincing textual performance I can form a believable impression of place. I may make my contribution to the South or *The South* by storytelling. I'm a storyteller, a legender, a liar.

Blair's reliable informants were his laptop, his cell phone, online archives and a photo database, all of which he explained could be accessed from his kitchen table (Blair, 11)¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁵ Martyn Bone, *The postsouthern sense of place in contemporary fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p.vii.

⁹⁶ Clare Chadd, "It ain't Arkansas or no real place': authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah's Post-South', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016) <doi:10.1353/mss.2016.0019> [accessed 5 May 2019], p.231.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p.237.

⁹⁸ Scott Romine, *The real South: Southern narrative in the age of cultural reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), p.9.

⁹⁹ Clare Chadd, "It ain't Arkansas or no real place': authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah's Post-South', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016) <doi:10.1353/mss.2016.0019> [accessed 5 May 2019], p.245.

¹⁰⁰ Jayson Blair, *Burning down my master's house* (California: New Millennium Entertainment, 2004), p.11.

These were my reliable informants too. Though, in fiction too there is a reader expectation of some authentic truth, if the writing is to be of value. This is why a writer's life experience is often linked to their novel in the reader's mind. After reading my debut novel *Darkling Park* (2016) a friend said she was embarrassed because she thought she was peering into my personal life. Another friend went looking for the fantastical fountains of Tooting, a complete fiction. These examples highlight the issues of authenticity, authority and ownership; more specifically the confusion over authenticity and accuracy stemming from the ideology and gatekeepers of in this case the Southern canon.

The traditional Southern canon holds that Southern writers must be born and bred in the South and that they are creatively channelling their authentic lived experience. However, those views are changing. The contemporary South and Southern writing is more fluid. Some academics have even suggested that the South has disappeared in the post-modern era, positing a post-Southern era and even a post-post-Southern era. I argue that the South is not only a geographical place but a place made up of discourses, mythologies and narratives. After researching the specific discourses, mythologies and narratives of said region, I needed to create a convincing performance out of this material. Both Lynn Butler-Kisber and Bayard discuss using fragments of found material to create. I too began using fragments from discourse, mythologies and narratives to create place. This is a selective process. Not everything relevant finds its way into the fiction collage. My aim was to create a convincing textual performance rather than a documentary.

I came to these conclusions after further researching academic debates about the South and Southern literature. Or as Jennifer Rae Greeson stated “[...] “literature of the South” provides a more straightforward description, denoting simply literature that rests

upon the figure of “the South” in some manner, while telegraphing neither a homogeneous identity of authors nor a unity of form’ (Greeson, 578).¹⁰¹ Jennifer Rae Greeson’s definition is broad but allows me to insert myself into the Southern literary landscape or the literature of the South. But to get here I had to wade through schools of thought from Agrarianism to Postsouthernism. The Agrarian school championed a sense of Southern place as a rural idyll in *I’ll take my stand: the South and the Agrarian tradition* by twelve Southerners of 1930. This cause was taken up by neo-agrarians who nostalgically looked back to a farm based economy where Southerners and characters knew their place and what was important, unlike Northerners tied to abstract dystopian values of capital and materialism. Bone characterise this as the ‘[...] fetishization of place in Southern literary studies’ (Bone, xi).¹⁰² And I would add there is something of an expected fetishization of place in Southern novels. Indeed I had leaned heavily on an emphasis on place to enable my novel world-building. However, the Southern material geography and history did not and does not reflect this Agrarian ideal. It ignores slavery, Jim Crow and the impact of rural poverty on those at the bottom of society. More recent changes such as the decline in farming and the fact that ‘[...] today one-half of all Southerners live in an urban environment’ (Rubin, 30).¹⁰³ according to Louis Rubin way back in 1962; and the contemporary transnational and postmodern globalized economy that has infiltrated or afflicted (depending on one’s political point of view) the American South. Where does the shifting intellectual conceptualisation of the South and the drastically changing material

¹⁰¹ Jennifer Rae Greeson, “‘What was ‘Southern Literature’?’”, *American Literary History*, 32. 3 (2020) <doi:10.1093/alh/ajaa021> [accessed 2 April 2021], p.578.

¹⁰² Martyn Bone, *The postsouthern sense of place in contemporary fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p.xi.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p.30.

reality leave me as a writer who had bought into the fundamental importance of place in Southern fiction? While I was not aligning myself with the conservative ahistorical Agrarians and their affluent white privilege I was counting on place as a marker of the literature of the South and in my novel process. Bone suggests that ‘Much like history, so too place melts into image and metaphor. The historical-geographical South gives way to the imag(in)ed South’ (Bone, 31).¹⁰⁴. Such reconceptualization was helpful for my creative process. As a writer I make things up after all. But it still felt insubstantial as if the South no longer existed ‘out there’. Or the South that is ‘out there’ is like Anywhere America.

However, recent global recessions may have returned the South to its former rustic appearance: ‘Arguably, it is the *withdrawal* of capital, followed inevitably by outward migration, that has produced the unpopulated “natural” landscape that [Southern author Eudora] Welty rhapsodizes over in terms approaching the pathetic fallacy’ (Bone, 39).¹⁰⁵. This links the rustic images of a rural South with an empty, derelict landscape post-depression, recession and even post COVID-19; the Empty in my novel. As Bone states: ‘I want to suggest that the historical-geographical materialist approach might help us to recover the relation between postsouthern literature and the sociospatial reality of the contemporary (post-) South’ (Bone, 45).¹⁰⁶. So we return to place and the significance of place, or rootedness to use Toni Morrison’s term which links people to a place, as trees are tied to the soil (Henderson, 218).¹⁰⁷. Therefore ‘The multiple and imbricated play of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.31.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.39.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.45.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Henderson, ‘Tangled roofs, a bloody forest: trees, trauma, and black female bodies in ‘Beloved’’, *African American Review*, 53.3 (2020), p.218.

genealogy, essence, and imaginary geography compose the South as coherent place, reproducing it instead as a constellation or field' (Romine. 234).¹⁰⁸.

There are thus many layers to this project and to the intellectual debates over what is the South and how it should be conceptualised. Each conceptualisation has its weaknesses or limitations but I have chosen the ones that best serve my project. There are photographs that show the material reality of the South today, these can be allied with non-fiction accounts. There are novels set in the South capturing the metaphorical South and creating images and essences of placedness. And there is academic research on literature that seeks to mine it for what it says about the South. I needed to create a collage of all of the above as a sort of soil or genealogy so that my novel was rooted in the South, all the while with the anxiety that I was not really a southern writer or could be. But I moved forward towards some acceptance, justification and validation of my project and its methods. My exhaustive research did give my project some much needed legitimacy. Although, borrowing methods, from fired fraudster Blair and Polo the fantasist barfly may not initially look too good. I have been rigorous and acted in good faith.

A pivotal moment came when I read Randall's *The wind done gone*.

This is a re-telling of *Gone with the wind* (Margaret Mitchell,) from the perspective of the enslaved peoples and local free men and women, surviving the Civil War and Reconstruction. The narrator Cynara was born into slavery in 1845. She is the half-sister of Other (Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the wind*). The house Tata and Cotton Farm are protected by enslaved people such as the powerful Garlic. The white owners are merely Garlic's puppets. Over the years boys born to Lady and Planter have been killed off. The plantation will never have new white masters. [My summary]

¹⁰⁸ Scott Romine, *The real South: Southern narrative in the age of cultural reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), p.234.

Randall was not from the South but Michigan. Her novel is set in Charleston, S.C. Georgia, Washington D.C. and London. Randall dares to write the South as an outsider, travelled to the South via another novel *Gone with the wind*, and she uses it to rewrite the South. The authentic result of her method enabled me to use other texts as modes of travel and discovery. Randall wrote the South well. *The wind done gone* was a *New York Times* best-seller, and Randall was awarded the Al Neuharth Free Spirit Award and named a finalist in the 2002 NAACP Image Award in literature. Although, according to her biography on the 2001 book jacket she now ‘lives in Nashville’, Tennessee, does this make her a more authentic Southern writer? Randall has given me a method or process and I have theoretical support from Southern scholars Bone, Chadd, Greeson and Romine too. This is surely what Romine meant when he talked about ‘The multiple and imbricated play of genealogy, essence, and imaginary geography compose the South as coherent place, reproducing it instead as a constellation or field’ (Romine. 234)¹⁰⁹. After my literary and academic turn around the South I reminded myself that I was not just creating a novel but a PhD thesis which must have a theoretical basis Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope felt like a perfect fit.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.234.

8 Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope theory applied to the Southern Gothic literary Southscape

I began to use other texts to travel around the South while assembling a scrapbook to catalogue and document my travels. However, I needed more. According to Miller: 'There should be no limit, geographic or otherwise, to our imaginative reach. But at the same time, it is important that our readers remain convinced' (Miller in Royle, 132).¹¹⁰. How could I convince my readers of my novel's authenticity? Collecting photographs of the South and adding references to kudzu was not enough if I was to go beyond the superficial. I needed to consider the place or setting in a more rigorous theoretical way.

I realised I could apply Bakhtin's concept of chronotope as a theory and a tool to build an authentic Southern Gothic novel. My goal became a thorough and credible Southern Gothic chronotope where: 'The epoch becomes not only graphically visible [space], but narratively visible [time]' (Bakhtin in Holquist, 247).¹¹¹. 'In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope' (Bakhtin in Holquist, 84).¹¹².

Thus the chronotope would become a catalyst. As a non-Southern writer I needed to work hard to create an authentic convincing place to achieve the fictive dream for readers,

¹¹⁰ James Miller, 'The importance of place and setting'. in Nicholas Royle, (ed). *The art of the novel* (UK: Salt, 2015), p.132.

¹¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Concluding remarks'. in Michael Holquist, (ed). *The dialogic imagination: four essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.247.

¹¹² Michael Holquist, 'Introduction to Bakhtin'. in Michael Holquist, (ed). *The dialogic imagination: four essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.84.

critics and my academic supervisors. I had not grown up in the environment of the Southern states: the climate, the food, speech patterns, the culture and its history were all alien. Such elements had to be ‘observed’, researched and learned and absorbed by me as the writer. Remember I was [only] travelling via the internet and through the writings of Southern writers.

If this process was applied effectively the time-space would become graphically visible and authentic or at least convincingly credible. It could be achieved by ‘reading the South’: researching the Civil War, literary essays, articles and native literature, landscape, food, the people and the way they talk... I began to read for the chronotope in Southern novels; and to try writing it into my novel. In this example, ‘Bee swallowed the food in her mouth, field peas, sprinkled with hot-pepper sauce, and corn bread’ (*The cure*, Brown, 20)¹¹³, Brown captures the Southern chronotope as outlined by Bakhtin above via a list of Southern foods.

As a non-native writer I used the chronotope as a tool or framing device to create a credible context and believable world for my characters to inhabit. However, as I have already said, it is not just about adding kudzu and Confederate flags. It was about creating a Southern richness in the texture and flavour of the prose, sentence by sentence.

It was necessary to explore Bakhtin’s chronotope concept in more detail. The chronotope is not just about the time-space of a novel, but the time-space of the author and reader’s historical epoch. They may be centuries apart. It is also about the novel or a particular genre’s field of possibilities, according to Bakhtin scholar Gary Saul Morson¹¹⁴.

¹¹³ Mary Ward Brown, ‘The cure’. in *Tongues of flame* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989, p.20.

¹¹⁴ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and freedom, the shadow of time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

The Southern Gothic and the Southern literary chronotope can be understood and realised by a writer by operationalising the concept of Southscape. At this point the landscape of my novel became the Southscape. This change represented a refining of my understanding and thinking. Southscape is a more accurate and effective way of thinking about the South in life and in literature than the more mundane and general concept landscape (more on this in chapter 15).

To return to Bakhtin's definition Nordan's Southern Gothic novel *Wolf whistle* (1995) fuses spatial and temporal indicators. The novel follows the brutal murder of black teenager Emmett Till in 1955 in Money, Mississippi by two white men who were tried and then acquitted. Nordan according to his book jacket was 15 in 1955 and a native of Mississippi. Thus he has a personal connection being a similar age to Till and the murder or lynching happened in his home state. Photographs of Till's deceased mutilated body made newspapers across America in part because of his mother's insistence that the crime receive widespread coverage and condemnation. Nordan too may have recognised the sleepy hamlet of Money after growing up in tiny Itta Bena. Nordan lets his readers know from the beginning of his novel that however picturesque the state may be it is dangerous particularly for black citizens.

'Filthy, violent men in shirtsleeves sat in doorways. They staggered, they leered, they drank out of sacks, they worked in muddy yards on junker cars with White Knights bumper stickers. Bottle-trees clanked [sic] in the breeze. A hundred-year-old voodoo woman wearing a swastika stirred a cauldron above a fire in a yard nearby. A young man tried to convince a woman, a girl really, to let him shoot an apple off her head with a pistol'

(Nordan, 7).¹¹⁵ Here we have the Southscape: poor, rural, degenerate and dangerous wilting under the legacy of the Civil War and segregation. The space is indeed charged and responsive to movements of time, plot and history. The Klan lurks linking the end of the Civil War to 1950s America, a bored young man tries to find a use for his time and his pistol. The bottle-tree clanks like a harbinger not a *Southern Living* magazine garden ornament. This will not end well. The Southscape is a powerful story element not just a back drop augmenting the plot.

I highlight this pivotal change from landscape to the more nuanced Southscape because this is how the writing process works. And the Southscape conceptualisation or chronotope allowed me scope to explore, understand and write my story-world. A family mausoleum morphed into Doll Island, Clay did not drown but was gummed to death by a giant catfish (such catfish do exist in Indian rivers and have been known to kill cattle). The purpose of this thesis is to reflect on the writing process and illuminate it for other writers. My thesis illustrates of the development of my thinking and creative process. Also this DIY punk approach fits with my collage approach by showing all the torn, rough edges. Collage and the Southscape became key composition tools.

¹¹⁵ Lewis Nordan, *Wolf whistle* (North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1995), p.7.

9 The Southscape as writing tool

I created my novel by travelling through literature and texts from and on the Southern States. This writing process felt a lot like learning to work in another language. I was writing in American English and Gullah and absorbing the South to enable my mind to creatively use this new world in an imaginative and intuitive way. I had to create my own landscape or more accurately Southscape to place my novel credibly and authentically in the Southern Gothic genre's field of possibilities where the macabre and the grotesque are fundamental elements harnessed to tell a meaningful story; and where the Southscape itself becomes a Gothic house filling in the lacuna left by the ruined castle of traditional European Gothic. Part of Southern Gothic's field of possibilities is the traditional expectation that there are lyrical descriptions of place.

This has sometimes led Southern writing in general to be dismissed and derogatively labelled 'local colour' writing. However, now I have become a Southern scholar I struggle with non-Southern texts because they often lack this lyrical landscape element. In Southern writing the landscape is a character too. By re-conceptualising the Southern landscape in literature as Southscape I found an expressive and useful concept to further my research and my creative writing process. Thadious Davis defines the Southscape and explains the close connection between people, society and the land, a definition that is kin to Bakhtin's chronotope ruminations.

'Thadious Davis chooses "Southscape" as a term that: 'references landscape in broad geographical-social contexts and mediated symbolic structures. As a concept, "Southscape" [...] primarily it acknowledge[s] the connection

between society and environment as a way of thinking about how raced [sic] human beings are impacted by the shape of the land” (Davis in Ellis, xxix).¹¹⁶

I travelled through Southern literature learning the Southscape language to build my own novel. Even journalists and non-fiction Southern writers tend to write within the Southscape paradigm. For example Jim J.R. Barger writing about the racist murder of 25 year old jogger: Ahmaud Arbery [23 February 2020]:

‘Nobody belonged to the salt marshes of coastal Georgia more than Ahmaud Arbery. His family’s roots there run more than 200 years deep’ (Barger).¹¹⁷

The following examples from Didion and New Yorker John Berendt applying their learned Southscape vocabulary and Southern writers Vernon and Texan James Lee Burke illustrate Davis’ point.

‘In McHenry, Mississippi, a gas station and a few shacks and a dirt road leading back into the pines, three barefoot children played in the dust by the gas station’ (Didion, 41).¹¹⁸

Berendt listens to Savannah local Miss Harty: ‘We have a saying: If you go to Atlanta, the first question people ask you is, “What’s your business?” In Macon they ask, “Where do you go to church?” In Augusta they ask your grandmother’s maiden name. But in Savannah the first question people ask you is “What would you like to drink?”’ (Berendt, 30-31).¹¹⁹

‘It did not matter in Valsin County, Mississippi, who a girl belonged to. Neither did it matter that the blood in your body was as hers, light like hers and running away from something, something tainted. Monstrous. And it was not a child’s fault that he did not know who he was or what was borne unto him. He was the crooked-letter i of Mississippi’ (Vernon, 17).¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Thadious Davis in Jay Ellis, ‘On Southern Gothic literature, introduction’. in *Southern Gothic literature* (ed). by Jay Ellis (Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013), p.xxix.

¹¹⁷ Jim J.R. Barger, ‘Ahmaud Arbery holds us accountable’, *The Bitter Southerner*, May 14 2020. <<https://bittersoutherner.com/2020/ahmaud-arbery-holds-us-accountable>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

¹¹⁸ Joan Didion, *South and West, from a notebook* (UK: 4th Estate, 2017), p.41.

¹¹⁹ John Berendt, *Midnight in the garden of good and evil* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) pp.30-31.

¹²⁰ Olympia Vernon, *Logic* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p.117.

'Hogman would probably still be in there, [Angola prison] except he got religion and a Baptist preacher in Baton Rouge worked a pardon for him through the state legislature. His backyard was dirt, deep in shadow from the live-oak trees, and sloped away to the bayou, where a rotted-out pirogue webbed with green algae lay half submerged in the shallow. He sat in a straight-backed wood chair under a tree that was strung with blue *Milk of Magnesia* bottles and crucifixes fashioned out of sticks and aluminium foil. When the breeze lifted out of the South, the whole tree sang with silver and blue light' (Burke, 83-84).¹²¹.

The quotes above illustrate the Southscape: remoteness and poverty; religion, ancestry and liquor; racism and Jim Crow (the crooked-letter in Mississippi); bayous, decay and homemade bottle trees. I have tried to achieve the same effects in my own writing without being simply derivative (I hope) or merely giving good local colour and little else. However, it is useful at this point to return to my Gothic roots, which pre-date the above.

¹²¹ James Lee Burke, *In electric mist with Confederate dead* (UK: Orion, 2000), pp.83-84.

10 Southscape, Bakhtin and the castle in Gothic literature

It is worth returning to Bakhtin and his theory of the castle's place in Gothic literature.

What Bakhtin elegantly explains about the castle in literature, that it is saturated with time and the past, can be applied to the Southern Gothic Southscape:

'The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past. The castle is the place where the lords of the feudal era lived (and consequently also the place of historical figures of the past); the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights. And finally legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels. [...] The organic cohesion of spatial and temporal aspects and categories in the castle (and its environs), the historical intensity of this chronotope, is what had determined its productivity as a source for images at different stages in the development of the historical novel' (Bakhtin in Holquist, 245-246).¹²².

I have included this lengthy quote because each listed trope leads to plot events in a Gothic story arc. They also fulfil the same function in Southern Gothic, as writers bend the Southscape in their direction or excavate these tropes from the Southscape to form a Southern Gothic tale. Brown's short story *Beyond new forks* (1986) echoes Bakhtin's paragraph above. The lonely road leads back into the past rather than taking the protagonist forward.

'The road home seemed lonely, leading back to the past instead of on to the future, like a half-forgotten scene in some old grammar-school reader. On

¹²² Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Concluding remarks'. in Michael Holquist, (ed). *The dialogic imagination: four essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp.245-246.

either side flat fields, newly harvested, lay serene in the quiet light. Low in the west, the sun going down in flamboyant red and gold' (Brown, 159).¹²³.

And even in Alphonso Brown's tourist guide book for Charleston (2013) the Southscape is the place where the 'lords of the feudal era' lived with the traces of centuries and generations arranged in it in visible form:

'The South Carolina and Georgia Sea island coast has many isolated islands that were inhabited by blacks long before, and following, the Civil War. The dual residency of some slave owners and the isolation that existed, especially after the Civil War, contributed to the proliferation not only of the language, but also of the African culture and traditions of the slaves. Their ancestors still practice (in some rural areas) the tradition of placing topsy-turvy medicine bottles or pills on the graves of the deceased...' (Brown, 12).¹²⁴.

Legends and traditions animate every corner of the Southern Gothic Southscape and its environs through their constant reminders of past events:

'Harriet stood very still. A tendril of vine hung over her face, quivering gently with her breath. His eyes—passing coldly over her, as he scanned the ground—shone with the bizarre, bling, marble-like cast that Harriet had seen in old photographs of Confederate soldiers: sunburnt boys with light-pinned eyes, staring fixedly into the heart of a great emptiness' (Tartt, 435).¹²⁵.

Bakhtin stated: 'It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels' (Bakhtin in Holquist, 245).¹²⁶. This can be said too of the Southscape, that the Southern Gothic chronotope gives rise to specific kind of narrative inherent in the Southscape that is then worked through

¹²³ Mary Ward Brown, 'Beyond New Forks'.in *Tongues of flame* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), p159.

¹²⁴ Alphonso Brown, *A Gullah guide to Charleston, walking through black history* (Charleston: The History Press, 2013), p.12.

¹²⁵ Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p.435.

¹²⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Concluding remarks'. in Michael Holquist, (ed). *The dialogic imagination: four essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.245.

by the writer in the Southern Gothic novel. The textual examples given thus far illustrate this point: slavery, the Confederacy, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights' era and the Black Lives Matter movement. This insight or analysis served as a writing tool for planning my novel. On one of the many redrafts I listed the tropes and attempted to either write them into the novel or augment them where they already existed. My scrapbook collage method was useful for making such tropes concrete.

This process was further aided by Sue Vice's unpicking of Bakhtin's chronotope to create a kind of typology for my writing whereby the chronotope became a composition tool. 'The chronotope operates on three levels: first, as the means by which a text represents history; second, as the relation between images of time and space in the novel, out of which any representation of history must be constructed; and third, as a way of discussing the formal properties of the text itself, its plot, narrator, and relation to other texts'" (Vice, 201-202).¹²⁷. Thus Bakhtin's castle explanation enables us to specifically understand the chronotope in operation.

Through the above textual examples I have substituted the castle for the Southern Gothic Southscape to facilitate my own novel experiment. I was able to unpick the writing process through the text by applying Sue Vice's clarification of the chronotope. My text represents history through some rather dubious tourist maps. Waker, my protagonist, considers this representation alongside the reader who may take it with a pinch of salt or file it away for future travelling reference either to avoid the hazardous area or seek it out. Finally *Three Kids and a dead dog* is in dialogue with other Southern Gothic texts because I had to read so many to fully understand the literary South and it was my mode of travel.

¹²⁷ Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (UK: Manchester University Press, 1997, pp.201-202).

Didion's text provided a role model. Her non-fiction work *South and West* about the South is clearly influenced by the literature of the South, particularly Southern Gothic. It is the lens through which she sees the South and consequently her readers do too. I can also chart the Southern Gothic chronotope as outlined by Vice, of how the text represents history:

'The time warp: the Civil War was yesterday, but 1960 is spoken of as if it were about three hundred years ago' (Didion, 104).¹²⁸

Then there is the relation between images of time and space in the text. Didion was traversing the Gulf South in the summer of 1970 (Nathaniel Rich, in Didion, x).¹²⁹, as an astute journalist observing the oft-quoted Faulknerism that 'the past isn't even the past'. It seemed the Civil War, Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras blotted out more recent events i.e.: the 1960s, an era of rebellion and social change.

'A Birmingham headstone:

SANDLIN

RAND IDA M.

1871-1953 1873 – 19

In so many family plots there was someone recently dead—dead after World War II—who remembered the Civil War. This was in a graveyard in a harsh red-dirt hill town, plastic flowers on the plots, overlooking the bright lights of the ballpark' (Didion, 72).¹³⁰

Representation and meaning are constructed out of such examples. The revisionism and the historically inaccurate 'Lost Cause' about a plucky but doomed fight for 'states' rights' was grown from this context. The 'heritage not hate' placards held by some white

¹²⁸ Joan Didion, *South and West, from a notebook* (UK: 4th Estate, 2017), p.104.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p.x.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p.72.

Southerners who cherish an emotional connection to a ‘wily’ general on a ‘noble’ horse in *their* town square (sic), conveniently omit the enslaved peoples he fought to own.

‘The bicycle ride to the Confederate Cemetery was a hot, hard, demanding one, which crossed the highway and wound through questionable neighbourhoods with hot-tamale shacks, little Greek and Italian and black kids kick-ball together on the street [...]’ (Tartt, 217-218).¹³¹.

“‘We’re certainly in Jones County now!’” said [aunt] Eddie gaily. [As she drives an unhappy, worried and surly Harriet to summer camp.] [...] “Do you remember Newt Knight the deserter from your Mississippi History, Harriet? The Robin Hood of the Piney Woods so he called himself! He and his men were poor and sorry, and they didn’t want to fight a rich man’s war so they holed up down here in the back woods and wouldn’t have a thing to do with the Confederacy. The Republic of Jones, that’s what they called themselves! [...]” (Tartt, 348).¹³².

Where does my work sit in relation to other Southern texts? I decided there needed to be references to the Southern cultural and literary obsession with the past. Though, I needed to avoid the dubious and dangerous nostalgic romance of the fictive ‘Lost Cause’ and the *Gone with the Wind* story style of moonlight and magnolias. Thus, my protagonist Waker is more interested in the macabre possibility of discovering conjoined twins in her family’s past. She does not find them, my way of avoiding more clichés and stereotypes of a backward, incestuous South. The Southern Gothic enabled me more beyond tired clichés to write the South without the usual stereotypes. I did use fundamental tropes such as climate and ruined houses. However, these were included to serve the narrative not just for local colour. They were also key elements to illustrate my theory that the Southern Gothic literary Southscape manifests all the elements of the traditional Gothic house.

¹³¹ Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), pp.217-218.

¹³² *Ibid*, p.348.

My text always is in dialogue with ‘Lost Cause’ revisionist texts and texts such as Randall’s skilled rebuttal *The wind done gone*. Randall illustrates the lives of enslaved people and free blacks surviving and thriving through their own agency. This dialogue allows the reader a kind of ironic distance from the place via characters and an opportunity to consider the material history of the South beneath antebellum romance. This is fundamental because trees in the South and Southscape are not merely shady live oaks heralding an upscale plantation tour or wedding venue but the site of murder of men, women and children lynched and photographed for local newspapers and family postcards.

‘When time is only an intensified present essentially disconnected from the past, then a rich sense of biographical and historical continuity must be missing’ (Morson, 106).¹³³.

This cannot be said of Southern Gothic fiction or Southern fiction in general. The Southscape always has that connection with a past. Like Vice, Morson ties Bakhtin’s theories more closely to specifics by explaining that each genre has a *field of possibilities*. And this can be said of the chronotope too. It may seem obvious but it is worth exploring for a writer new to a particular genre.

‘It is obvious that events plausible in some genres are extremely unlikely, if not impossible, in others’ (Morson, 106).¹³⁴.

Because: ‘Bakhtin [...] focused on the portrayal of time within the narrative itself. Each narrative genre, he reasoned, has its own way of understanding time, a unique and specific “density and concreteness” distinguishing it from all other genres [...]. In each genre, Bakhtin wrote, “time, as it were, thickens, takes flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and

¹³³ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and freedom, the shadow of time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p.106.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p.106.

responsive to the movement of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin in Morson, 106).¹³⁵.

Morson’s point is germane: some genres such as adventure and romance can be moved to other times and places in history. They can be ahistorical. Their action is thus historically “reversible” and socially “replaceable” according to Morson (Morson, 109).¹³⁶. Though, for the big 19th novels such as *Middlemarch* (1871-2) or *Anna Karenina* (1878) this is not the case because they are rooted in the 19th century and they are particular to that time. Time and place in some genres can be flexible. There have been contemporary retellings of Shakespearean plays and Jane Austen’s novels *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815) and *Pride and prejudice* (1813) became the contemporary films *Metropolitan* (1990), *Clueless* (1995) and *Bridget Jones diary* (2001). The story can survive in a new setting because it works with its genre’s ahistorical chronotope.

Plots and stories in the Southern Gothic could be moved around historically from say the 1950s to the 1970s in theory. However, a keen reader would need to be able to pinpoint when and where in Southern history they were set, for example: pre Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights or our contemporary Black Lives Matter era. The Southern Gothic chronotope needs this context concreteness where time takes on flesh and becomes visible and charged. For example, in the television series *Lovecraft country* (2020) an adaptation of Matt Ruff’s novel of the same name (2016), some children play with a Ouija board and Bobo asks if he will have a good trip. Those who know the South (and their history) know that Bobo was Emmet Till’s nickname. Although, *Lovecraft*

¹³⁵ Ibid, p.106.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.109.

country is a horror fantasy television series and novel, the author uses the Southern Gothic chronotope and Southscape as the basis of his often messy plot.

The genre field of possibilities in the Southern Gothic with its quotidian macabre and grotesque-ness does not translate when moved elsewhere. Cousin Velvet saving discarded fetuses makes her a horror story, outside of Southern Gothic. However, within the genre a reader can see this is an act of compassion and an attempt to right a historical wrong: Black bodies being used for medical experiments without their family's consent and infanticides due to Jim Crow segregation and legislation against 'miscegenation'. This is what appealed to me as a writer, the fixed and fundamental nature of the place to the story and characters.

'Particularly important for Bakhtin is the novel's sense of *the relation between biographical and historical time*. Not only are both individuals and society continually "becoming," they also shape each other [...] These two temporalities engage in a complex and open-ended dialogue' (Morson, 109-110).¹³⁷.

Thus, my characters' lives are shaped by the historical nature of the place they find themselves in. Waker is slowly changed by spending time with her rural relatives and the battles she has to survive. But more than this, whether they are aware of it or not, the children are being pushed around by Southern history. The family is 'mixed race' but Halo is darker than her father Clay who can 'pass' as white. Her mother is black. Clay is ambivalent about his family and oscillates between indulgence and viciousness when dealing with his daughter. Grandpa Theo resembles a General Lee figure, although he is descended from the haughty freed black woman Saleenuh. Her name is a derivation of

¹³⁷ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and freedom, the shadow of time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp.109-110.

Sa'Leenuh (a Gullah word for St Helena Island, on the South Carolina sea coast) where Saleenuh was born (Brown's Gullah glossary).¹³⁸ Halo is hostile to Waker initially because of her apparent white privilege of which Waker is hardly aware. These (and other under currents) seep into the text and the day to day lives of the characters, as one would presumably find in the South today.

As I wrote the text, and processed the story creatively my intuition pushed me towards the Gullah dialect. The characters began to use Gullah words that connected them across colour-lines and to a west and central African pre-slavery past. Therefore there really was a relation between biographical and historical time. But still very specific to this genre's field of possibilities and including all the elements that Bakhtin lists for the castle in the Gothic and applying Vice's typology too. The introduction of the Gullah dialect which according to Brown is: '[...] an English-based, creolized language that naturally evolved from [...] the slaves in South Carolina and Georgia. [Including] many African and English words and expressions... or whatever could be picked up, depending on the nationality of the slave owner' (Brown, 11).¹³⁹ was a pivotal moment in my writing process providing an underlying coherence to the narrative arc and historical nature of writing the South. It made the writing process more concrete and more authentic. I was learning about the South in order to write the South. My writing process was like learning a new language. And I was literally learning a new language: Gullah. Though, as a white writer I made the conscious decision to not use: *dis, dat, dees, dem* and *dey* for: *this, that, these, them* and *they* (according to Brown 'There are no "th" sounds in most African languages...' (Brown,

¹³⁸ Gullah Tours, *Gullah tours and Gullah words* (2019) <<http://gullahtours.com/gullah/gullah-words>> [accessed 10 August 2019].

¹³⁹ Alphonso Brown, *A Gullah guide to Charleston, walking through black history* (Charleston: The History Press, 2013), p.11.

13-14)¹⁴⁰. Despite the fact this is true to the Gullah dialect to an uninitiated reader it may look like blackface. Gullah is contextualised in my novel and within the history of my chosen region but I am not proficient. And according to YouTuber Khadija Mbowe in her vlog essay on *Digital blackface* (2020), there is a danger of attempting African American Vernacular English (AAVE) [which shares many similarities with Gullah], becoming Imagined Black English which is in effect linguistic minstrelry and white plagiarism (Mbowe)¹⁴¹. I decided to leave those ‘dese’ and ‘dems’ out, which takes me back to Morson’s remarks about the relation between biographical time and historical time. In this case it is not only within the novel but for the writer and readers outside of said novel. There is indeed an open-ended dialogue between temporalities, as demonstrated by my engagement with Khadija Mbowe’s essay (2020). Here my writing and my novel’s time-space becomes artistically visible and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history. Bakhtin’s chronotope becomes a writing tool.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, pp.13-14.

¹⁴¹ Khadija Mbowe, *Digital blackface* (2020), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfcYnswbybM>> [accessed 2 August 2021].

11 Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope applied as creative writing tool

Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope was a useful planning tool. However, I wanted to do more with it. I assembled a mental catalogue of the Southscape for the time-space of my novel through my research. I began to turn these elements into my own Southscape with particular attention to writing the world my characters inhabited. But this was still about theory and research. I wanted to see if it was possible to use Bakhtin's theory as a methodology too. After all, I was writing a novel. I needed something practical to aid or augment my writing practice. After some research I discovered a writing experiment conducted by Paul Thompson and Christine Hall. They applied Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope to enable pupils to improve their creative writing development at primary school (Thompson and Hall, 5).¹⁴². I decided to test this approach by applying it to my own writing process because according to Thompson and Hall:

'Over a period of months, the technical quality of [the pupil's] writing improved in tandem with an increasingly vivid conceptualisation of time and space' (Thompson and Hall, 5).¹⁴³.

'[...]each successive draft of [the pupil's] writing improves in its effectiveness, primarily through the fusion of a more concrete sense of time and differentiated visualisation of space' (Thompson and Hall, 6).¹⁴⁴.

This was exciting to read. As a writer any advice or technical skill development practices are consumed to take my skill up to the next level. The fact that Thompson and Hall had been working with primary school children made no difference to me as a writer. If it worked I could use it, and use it to teach others to hone their craft too. The technique

¹⁴² Paul Thompson and Christine Hall, 'How an understanding of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope can assist progression in classroom writing', *English in Education*, 38. 1 (2004) <doi: 10.1111/j.1754-8845.2004.tb00770.x> [accessed 22 October 2015], p.5.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p.5.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.6.

Thompson and Hall used was as follows: pupils wrote a first draft of a story. Next a role play was used to nail the key story elements. Thompson and Hall noticed that: ‘The chronotope in the story’s second version is more spatially and temporally elaborated than in the first’ (Thompson and Hall, 11)¹⁴⁵. Next pupils evaluated one another’s work and there was an incubation period where the pupils themselves matured. In version three: ‘Characters are grounded much more in this final version within a temporal framework. There is a more consciously crafted sense of “becoming”’ (Thompson and Hall, 15)¹⁴⁶.

I applied this technique to my own writing process, leaving out the role play element. I used my intuition and creative imagination for my first draft. I had the germ of a good story, or at least some interesting story elements, some sketchy characters and a ruined old house venue. The American South location pointed towards Southern Gothic. Although, this did not mature until I researched key elements of Southern Gothic: the macabre and the grotesque. If there was any ‘role play’ it was my reading Southern writers, reading academic journal articles and texts, and watching films and documentaries to try to better inhabit my chosen region. I used my writer’s and reader’s empathy to inhabit those spaces. Thus, the chronotope in the story’s second draft was far more spatially and temporally elaborated than in the first draft. For example, at the end of the novel I had the characters hanging about at the side of the road waiting for Clay’s funeral to end. However, it was almost as if they were outside of time and space, cartoon characters against a blank white background. After considering the above I realised I needed to ‘colour in’ the time-space by describing the graveyard and the funeral ceremony. This allowed me to place Waker, Theo and Halo in space, there are some shells and bottles

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.11.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p.15.

decorating some of the headstones and some Gullah and Hoodoo rituals anchor them in the South and within Southern history.

My work was evaluated by my supervisor and at an ongoing monthly novelists' workshop *Chalk the sun*, in South London. During my MA in creative writing we had been instructed to take our feedback in silence. This was very hard indeed. It felt like taking all your clothes off to strike a heroic statue pose only to be told 'Meh'. However, by sticking with this silent process I learned far more than I would have done had I been trying to explain and justify my writing. If it does not work for the reader, it does not work for the reader and writers need to fix the problem text. I made a lot of notes: things that worked, things that did not, things that were unclear and confusing, and of course, there were some stylistic differences too. Often my fellow writer readers picked up on areas I had concerns about too. And they did not let me get away with any tricks, blagging or fudging. I was putting myself through the process the primary school pupils had been through with their peers to improve their creative writing.

My research enabled me to 'colour in the chronotope', to take my draft novel to the next level. There was also an incubation period where I was reading the South rather than writing the South. When I started my PhD in October 2015 I signed with Patrician Press for my debut novel *Darkling Park*. This was very exciting, and validation for me. I became a published author. However, this meant my *Darkling Park* manuscript went back and forth between Patricia Borlenghi, CEO of Patrician Press and myself to prepare my novel for publication. Consequently *Three kids and a dead dog* was shelved for a whole year. But this enforced incubation was useful. For example, I had initially written three children baking in the Southern heat, waiting by the side of a road for a funeral to finish. There was no

fleshing out of time and space of the chronotope. I later wrote in the cemetery in some detail and the funeral service itself; which included Gullah and Hoodoo elements.

I matured as a Southern writer. My prose was far better in the final version because my characters were grounded much more within a temporal framework and there was a more consciously crafted sense of becoming to borrow Thompson and Hall's conclusion (Thompson and Hall, 15)¹⁴⁷. My attention then turned to other writers who had applied the chronotope in their own prose.

¹⁴⁷ Paul Thompson and Christine Hall, 'How an understanding of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope can assist progression in classroom writing', *English in Education*, 38. 1 (2004) <doi: 10.1111/j.1754-8845.2004.tb00770.x> [accessed 22 October 2015], p.15.

12 Bakhtin, George Saunders and Viv Albertine coalesce into collage

George Saunders, a Texan, was on my radar initially because I considered him to be a Southern writer. Texas is located in the Southern United States. However, Texas is also a Western State and considered by many Texans to be its own thing: Texas is Texas; a moot point. But Saunder's novel *Lincoln in the bardo* (2017) was set during the American Civil War when President Lincoln's eleven year old son Willie dies all of which was more relevant to my field. And the novel itself is set out as a kind of literary collage. This was enlightening and inspired me to use collage as a method to build my PhD research and my novel. However, as I read through *Lincoln in the bardo* it also became clear that it was the purest example of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope applied. The text made Bakhtin's theory visible in literature. Once I better understood the chronotope theory through this illustration I realised I could use said theory as a writing tool or method.

The time-space or chronotope is concentrated or distilled in this novel because *Lincoln in the bardo* is set out as a collage of quotes rather than in traditional narrative paragraphs. This method allows Saunders to get right to the heart of the story as a poet might in a few words. However, it also allows Saunders to represent time and place as it may well have been then; but also filters it through the writing and opinions of those there at the time: Lincoln and his contemporaries and then through the later writings of historians and commentators. Some of the sources are imagined by Saunders, some are authentic. Thus, Saunders gets straight to the heart of the chronotope with curated quotes alongside short fictional sections. Blank white space surrounds these quotes where a descriptive paragraph would sit in a traditional novel, thus highlighting, for the reader,

the essence of the narrative. Natasha Brown¹⁴⁸ achieves the same in her highly skilled short novel *Assembly* (2021), writing in textual short bursts surrounded by empty pages. However, I believe Saunders is quite specifically using Bakhtin's chronotope theory to structure and plan his text.

'Time is introduced into a person, enters into his very image, changing in a fundamental way the significance of all aspects of his identity and life' (Bakhtin in Thompson and Hall, 16)¹⁴⁹.

Below is an example from Saunders' writing that illustrates Bakhtin's point. Zinc chloride goes into the corpse of Willie Lincoln preserving his body for the contemporary moment but also into future time. The reader has a sense of his death, when it occurred and its terrible lifelong effect on his parents; both their personal and professional lives. President Lincoln in the novel (and in life) continued to grieve and visit the body for some time after Willie's death. Willie's significance and identity are altered by the process of his illness, passing and his subsequent preservation.

'Five quarts of a 20 percent solution of zinc chloride injected through the popliteal artery not only preserved a body for a minimum of two years, but also wrought a wondrous transformation, giving the body the appearance of luminous white marble. Craughtwell, op.cit' (Saunders, 287-288)¹⁵⁰.

Saunders has done something interesting. In this novel time appears to have stopped. Willie and a host of noisy ghosts are trapped in the bardo unable to move on until they can fix, resolve or atone for mistakes while alive. Some like Willie need the living to let them go on elsewhere. However, according to 'Bakhtin [explains] the importance of a

¹⁴⁸ Natasha Brown, *Assembly* (UK: Hamish Hamilton, 2021)

¹⁴⁹ Paul Thompson and Christine Hall, 'How an understanding of Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope can assist progression in classroom writing', *English in Education*, 38. 1 (2004) <doi: 10.1111/j.1754-8845.2004.tb00770.x> [accessed 22 October 2015], p.16.

¹⁵⁰ George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp.287-288.

sense of the fullness of time in narrative exposition: “Where there is no passage of time there is also no moment of time, in the full and most essential meaning of the word. If taken outside its relationship to past and future, the present loses its integrity, breaks down into isolated phenomena and objects, making of them a mere abstract conglomeration” (Bakhtin in Holquist, 146).¹⁵¹ Time may have stopped for President Lincoln and Willie, but Saunders has time and history rage around them with description and contemporary commentary. There is a terrible tension between the stopped time or non-time of the bardo co-existing with the Civil War. Even before Willie dies the stopped time of his sick room contrasts with the desperate necessity for the Lincolns to appear at key functions to oil the wheels of a battered wartime government.

‘Willie was burning with fever on the night of the fifth, as his mother dresses for the party. He drew every breath with difficulty. She could see that his lungs were congested and she was frightened. In *Twenty Days*, by Dorothy Meserve. Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt Jr’ (Saunders, 9)¹⁵².

‘Yet there was no joy in the evening for the mechanically smiling hostess and her husband. They kept climbing the stairs to see how Willie was, and he was not doing well at all. Kunhardt and Kunhardt, *op.cit*’ (Saunders, 15)¹⁵³.

Willie is gravely ill in a time before antibiotics and modern paediatric medicine on the night of an important presidential engagement early in the American Civil War in 1862. His distraught parents cannot stay continuously by his bedside. This is a clear moment in time, described with integrity and realism. Willie’s death anchors us to President Lincoln and First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and to their fragile hopes and dreams while the Civil War rages around them. 1862 is a significant year, when General Lee takes command of the

¹⁵¹ Michael Holquist (ed). *The dialogic imagination: four essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.146.

¹⁵² George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.9.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p.15.

Confederate army and infamous battles are fought: Shiloh (Union victory), the second battle of Bull Run at Manassas Junction (Confederate victory), Antietam (a bloody stalemate) and the Shenandoah Valley campaign (Confederate victory).

Saunders rearranged historical sources alongside his own fictional ones creating a collage of layers and meanings. In an interview with Zadie Smith, Saunders explains:

‘Yes, whole swathes of the book are made up of verbatim quotes from various historical sources, which I cut up and rearranged to form part of the narrative. This was only way I could get in some (what felt to me) necessary historical facts...’ (Saunders).¹⁵⁴.

This collage collection method was how I had done my research to build my thesis and my novel, following my intuition: learning about the American Civil War led to reading about Harriet Tubman and the Combahee river raid, a digression into Botanical Gothic and then back to cow-eating catfish and exploring Doll Island with YouTuber *Exploring with Josh*.¹⁵⁵ I created whole swathes of material from which to cut and arrange my novel. However, I did not set out my novel in an experimental form. Saunders dispensed with traditional linear storytelling paragraphs. I used a collage of historical sources and other sources to form my narrative. Saunders’ approach enabled me to see my method clearly. His collage was laid out on the page; any ‘waffle’ or padding was stripped away with just the key elements, or essence, left.

This approach also suited with my emerging DIY punk aesthetic. As Viv Albertine (former member of the ground breaking all female punk band The Slits) outlines in her 2016 autobiography: ‘We have to take little snatches of ideas and inspiration wherever we

¹⁵⁴ Zadie Smith, ‘George Saunders’, *Interview Magazine*, Feb. 15 2017
<<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/george-saunders>> [accessed 8 August 2020].

¹⁵⁵ Exploring with Josh, *Haunted doll island Mexico (Isla de las muñecas)* (2016),
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=or7APxs3bUc> [accessed 1 August 2019].

find them... and stitch it all together like a patchwork quilt to create [The Slits' sound]' (Albertine, 233).¹⁵⁶ She also ruminates about starting from zero (Albertine, 233).¹⁵⁷ which was where I started with the South, not coming from that tradition I was, like Albertine, learning to play guitar as the band toured in the late 1970s. 'It's OK not to be perfect, to show the workings of your life and your mind in your songs and clothes' (Albertine, 131).¹⁵⁸ I am showing the workings of my mind, my creative process and my snowballing research methods in my thesis.

Although, I did chose a traditional approach for my novel text because I felt readers would prefer a novel presented in this way rather than a postmodern deconstruction of texts. Saunders text is very skilled and thus successful, but his postmodern deconstruction method may be the exception rather than the rule. Readers need to have some grasp of postmodernism to attempt and later enjoy such texts. Instead *Three kids and a dead dog* can be read by older children and adults alike, which makes it more accessible, inclusive and democratic. It could be argued there is something elitist about postmodernism because it usually requires some level of further education to understand.

Butler-Kisber defines collage as 'Collage, taken from the French verb, *coller* (to stick), is the process of using fragments of found images or materials and gluing them to a flat surface to portray phenomena' (Butler-Kisber, 2).¹⁵⁹ According to Butler-Kisber collage is a reflective process, a form of elicitation and a way of conceptualising. My scrapbook journey allowed me to explore images and writing on the American South and then stand

¹⁵⁶ Viv Albertine, *Clothes, clothes, clothes, music, music, music, boys, boys, boys* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2016), p.233.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.233.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.131.

¹⁵⁹ Lynn Butler-Kisber and Tiiu Poldma, 'The power of visual approaches in qualitative inquiry: the use of collage making and concept mapping in experiential research', *Journal of Research Practice*, 6.2 (2010) <<http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/197/196>> [accessed 19 April 2020], p.2.

back and distil the Southern Gothic elements. Remember like Albertine and punk I was starting from zero. Collage enabled my reflective process by literally tearing out common elements from Southern literature and sticking them back together I realised the Southern Gothic Southscape had all the elements of a Gothic house. And despite my setting the novel sometime/someplace before or beyond reach of mobile phones issues around 'race' and racism surface. The Black Lives Matter movement, segregation and Reconstruction and identity politics billowed up into the present and into my novel.

Not only was I forging a kinship with Southern and Southern Gothic writers and writing, my process also related to the contemporary activities of Blair, Jessica Krug and Rachel Dolezal. I too was transgressing a border, crossing a line. While not pretending to be a native born Southerner I was presenting my text as an authentic Southern Gothic novel. This took me back to the question: what does the Southern Gothic do and what does the Southern Gothic allow me to do as a writer? Why Southern Gothic? Southern Gothic allowed me to write the macabre and grotesque as I outlined earlier, in a way that highlights a character's humanity rather than diminishes it. I felt my story only worked in the Southern Gothic genre and it allowed me to test my theory about the Southscape.

While engaging in the creative process: 'It is important to work from the feeling to the idea and not the reverse' (Butler-Kisber, 4)¹⁶⁰. This suited me because I had the germ of my novel before I had anything else: the feeling or intuition before any theory and knowledge. And it was a messy process. However, 'This does not suggest that the emergent and messy thinking that results from collaging and provides interesting insights should be eliminated' (Butler-Kisber, 5)¹⁶¹. So Butler-Kisber is arguing for, and I would add

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p.5.

validating my method. Collage is indeed messy. One creates an overwhelming pile of torn paper of texts and images. Then one starts to stick them together forming new adjacencies, and uncovering new insights. It is a risky strategy for a PhD project because there is a danger that the thesis itself initially appears to be a mess of random ideas and research. However, if followed (and I beg tolerated) coherence emerges. After all when reading a novel it is not clear at the start who committed the crime or how the protagonist will triumph. If it is why would the reader bother to go on the journey? So why not, as a novelist with this skill, apply it to one's PhD thesis. I would argue a thesis does not have to be strictly linear or chronological say, to add intellectual value to the academy.

This thinking or writing-with-scissors led to insight and further collage exploration. In a lecture entitled: how do novels beguile? Professor Belinda Jack makes the following point:

'[...] writing is very often re-writing, the subtle adjustment of words that have [been] written before. No writer has ever been entirely "original". What writers write depends on their own experience, but often filtered through their reading, which again influences their writing. Novels beguile because they constitute part of a history of endlessly re-told stories that stretch back in human history' (Jack)¹⁶².

Saunders when interviewed about his creative process writing *Lincoln in the bardo* made a similar point:

'There was one sequence of days when I had halfway decided to use the historical nuggets, but I wasn't quite sure it would work. I'd be in my room for six or seven hours, cutting up bits of paper with quotes and arranging them on the floor, with this little voice in my head saying, "Hey, this isn't writing!" But at the end of that day, I felt that the resulting section was doing important

¹⁶² Belinda Jack, 'How do novels beguile', *Gresham College*, <<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/how-do-novels-beguile>> [accessed 13 June 2014].

emotional work. Later, I went one step further, by putting in some invented “historical” bits’ (Saunders).¹⁶³

I too cut up text and pictures and other ‘random’ bits of paper, thinking: hey this is not research but it was. This process illustrated Morson’s point that for Bakhtin novels create a relationship between biographical and historical time where individuals and society are continually “becoming” in a complex and open-ended dialogue (Morson, 109-110).¹⁶⁴ Saunders’ novel is the perfect illustration of this process because of its succinct structure. Although, as already stated I did not set out my novel or my thesis as a collage like Saunders, the research process that lies beneath each was exactly that. Maybe this can be glimpsed when reading both? *Three kids and a dead dog* contains Bible quotes and a famous sentence from Alan Garner’s novel *The red shift* (1973) which I stumbled upon in Mark Fisher’s: *The weird and the eerie* (2016) that I discovered when attending an Eco Gothic conference at Roehampton University in 2019, for example. Garner may have been on a similar haphazard journey:

‘It is said that Alan Garner’s extraordinary novel *The Red Shift* (1973) was triggered by the author seeing a piece of graffiti at a railway station which read “not really now not anymore”. There is something so eerie, so cryptic, so suggestive about that phrase, especially when written as an anonymous graffito’ (Fisher, 90).¹⁶⁵

‘Does this mean that the present has eroded, disappeared – no now anymore? Are we in the time of the always-already, where the future has been written; in which case it is not the future, not really?’ (Fisher, 91).¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Zadie Smith, ‘George Saunders’, Interview Magazine, Feb. 15 2017

<<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/george-saunders>> [accessed 8 August 2020].

¹⁶⁴ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and freedom, the shadow of time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp.109-110.

¹⁶⁵ Mark Fisher, *The weird and the eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p.90.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.91.

Here we have something from somewhere else that bubbles up through the text. It questions time. Much of Southern writing is drenched in the past. This section may imply that the future too is done already.

[Daisy Johnson: youngest writer ever shortlisted for the Booker prize interviewed about her latest horror genre book *Sisters*] firmly says she's not the kind of writer that turns away from reading fiction when she's working on her own books [...]. She is, instead, a magpie, of the belief that "nothing is sacred, and I think we should take everything that we possibly can and make it our own and send it out into the world" (Clark, 18)¹⁶⁷.

These comments from other writers were highly relevant to my own process. There was a constant dialogue between my reading, research and writing the South. I too was magpie-ing information to make it my own, whether it was about time, place, space or literature. And after a while one's thesis becomes sticky. Consequently, one attracts relevant sources, ideas and authors to expand the core. Bakhtin's theories became part of a Venn diagram with collage and intuition overlapping.

¹⁶⁷ Alex Clark, 'Interview: Daisy Johnson', *The Saturday Guardian Review*, Aug. 8 2020, p.18.

13 Intuition, collage and Hoodoo converge

This is a good point to recap and consider my practice-based methodological approach in more detail. In a nutshell: I read the South through literature and academic writing. This was my way of travelling across the South. I then attempted to write the South as a Southern Gothic novel. Graeme Harper's research on practice-based creative writing PhDs was helpful in the early stages of my thesis because his questions and the students' answers were useful for developing my writing process.

Did you have what might be called a "research question" in mind [at the beginning]? (Harper, 248).¹⁶⁸.

'No, I didn't have a research question, or not at first. But one emerged. I didn't put the methodology first and the practice second, I did it the other way round, and I had no trouble at all finding theoretical results from my practice' (Manderson, in Harper, 252).¹⁶⁹.

I had several beginnings. Initially I did not have clear research questions. However, I needed to anchor my work within a theoretical framework. It had to be academic enough for the academy. After some false starts and dead-ends Bakhtin literary theory of the chronotope of the novel enabled me to formulate a path. I applied his theory to the Southern Gothic to interrogate my field *and* serve as a tool to build my novel. Also, as already outlined I was neither a native Southerner or able to visit the American South, I travelled via literature using the chronotope as a navigation tool and container.

And as I read, researched and wrote my novel theoretical ideas emerged that might serve as research questions. Was the Southern Gothic Southscape in Southern Gothic

¹⁶⁸ Graeme Harper, 'The creative writing doctorate across the world', *New Writing, the international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing*, 9.2 (2012)
<doi: 10.1080/14790726.2012.665059> [accessed 22 September 2016], p.248.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.252.

literature actually a Gothic house? There was a symbiosis between my creative practice and my growing knowledge and awareness of my field. This was the experience of other practice-based PhD students in Harper's study. He asked:

'Was there, for example, an identifiable flow from creative practice to knowledge of practice, or knowledge of ...well, knowledge of any of the elements you were drawing upon for your project?' (Harper, 248).¹⁷⁰.

'For me there absolutely was a flow, a development, a learning process, and it started from the moment I started to write [...] My reading began to flow into my writing and vice versa' (Manderson in Harper, 252-253).¹⁷¹.

'There was flow between everything, between the fiction that was hugely influenced by the research...' (Guest in Harper, 260).¹⁷².

'[...] I think of the writer as a kind of *sophisticated recycling centre*, in which everything heard, read, seen, understood, is filtered and comes out looking completely different ...' [italics mine] (Butt in Harper, 278).¹⁷³.

I had the same experience as Manderson, Guest and Butt. Indeed, the idea of a writer as sophisticated recycling centre became a key part of my writing and research process methodology, which evolved into an intuitive-collage-based approach. This also fits my DIY punk approach. Harper's research provided me with some signposts, some questions and insights from other practice-based PhD students who had made the journey before me. However, I needed to backtrack to ruminate over what exactly a practice-based PhD was before I move forward.

'Stated simply, *practice-based research* is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge, partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice' (Candy, 63).¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p.248.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, pp.252-253.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.260.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.278.

¹⁷⁴ Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds, 'Practice-based research in the creative arts foundations and futures from the front line', *Leonardo*, 51.1 (2018), p.63.

And:

‘Practice that is creative is characterized not only by a focus on creating something new but also by the way that the making process itself leads to a transformation in the ideas—which in turn leads to new works’ (Candy, 64).¹⁷⁵.

Hence I was to create something original, my novel *Three Kids and a dead dog*. This grew out of an emerging collage-based approach to reading the South, one informing and changing the other, back and forth. My novel and thesis are contributions to knowledge. But this research, as Candy states, is about the product *and* the process (Candy 64).¹⁷⁶. My work still needed to be recognisable by conforming to literary and scholarly conventions and appraisal. ‘New knowledge about practice that informs practice may at times only be obtainable by adopting a practice-based approach’ (Candy, 63).¹⁷⁷. This insight was useful and serves as a validation for my methods too. Candy’s suggestion or assertion that an artist must start creating and making the art or begin the process and work their way through on a journey or evolution will enable said artist (or art academic) to uncover insights and understandings leading to new knowledge. After all it was only by doing this work that I found myself intuitively using the collage-based approach for the practice-based PhD research. ‘Here, the artefact plays a vital part in the new understandings about practice that arise’ (Candy, 63).¹⁷⁸, because my novel grew out of a collage of images and readings, it can be taken apart and put back together as a collection of dreams, ideas, sources, influences and heritages. Also, I was consciously gathering material from Southern literature, history, geography and the academy, (covering a very broad and

<https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/LEON_a_01471> [accessed 15 April 2020], p.63.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.64.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p.64.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p.63.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p.63.

diverse field) which then needed to be culled, curated and stitched together into a coherent whole. Collage literally allows one to tear up texts (or knowledge) and stick it next to another text, which may initially appear an odd adjacency, but when enough 'pieces' are assembled a pattern appears that may be new; new relationships can emerge and so new insights generated. This may not be possible without the use of collage because this process enabled me to research in the widest possible sense, without collage I may have been forced to take a narrow and more traditional PhD path, for example just reading Southern Gothic literature and nothing else.

This process provided a new understanding, for me at least, about the writing process. The collage approach became central to my practice and a useful way to illustrate my writer's journey. I was able to show new writers my scrapbook and explain how pictures of ideas, dreams, characters, events and found objects could be torn, arranged, re-arranged and stuck together to provoke new insights, uncover underlying themes, connections and stories. Kingston School of Art chose my collage cover for *Three Kids and a dead dog* to illustrate their student handbook, as a piece of postgraduate work *in action*, the process rather than product. Indeed, attempting to illustrate the writing process is difficult because most of it takes place in the mind, through leaps of intuition and the unconscious. My biro and paper is the tip of a very large iceberg.

However, 'Practice-based research is a research approach that has yet to reach a settled status in terms of its definition and discourse, despite its presence in academic contexts for over 35 years' (Candy, 63).¹⁷⁹ This lacuna allowed me freedom to choose how I was going to undertake my research. My artefact was going to be fundamental to the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p.63.

process. 'For practice-based researchers, making an artefact is pivotal, and the insights from making, reflecting and evaluating may be fed back directly into the artefact itself' (Candy, 65)¹⁸⁰.

Initially, I planned to write a novella because of the PhD length limit of around 40,000 words. However, on further research and at my supervisor's suggestion I realised I had begun to write a short novel. Novellas tend to be centred on one event rather than several. As a writer it was more satisfying and logical to write a whole novel to apply and grow my skills and fully develop my characters and story world. I felt my supervisors would rather read a short novel than the first third of a longer book. Also it would better test of my storytelling skills to manage a complete story. I initially 'managed' this in 33,000 words but there was something almost strangled about my text, so obsessed I had become with length. My supervisor explained I needed at least another 5,000 or 10,000 words to develop my novel. I eventually found another 17,000.

However, what of the insights, reflection and evaluation? Linda Candy and Earnest Edmonds both state that research and practice must be separated at some point, to objectively evaluate the creative piece *and* the academic new knowledge. '[...] practice-based research is research not practice alone' (Candy, 68)¹⁸¹. My novel does not stand alone as a PhD endeavour; there must be some discernible scholarship in some form of thesis adjacent to it. Hence, my engagement with Bakhtin to explain and interrogate my work. And placing my novel in dialogue with the Southern Gothic and Southern literary canon. The Bakhtinian chronotope also morphed from analytical discussion to writing tool. I then developed my own theory applying the chronotope to Southern Gothic literature

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p.65.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p.68.

and my own writing: that the Southern Gothic Southscape contained and manifested all the elements of a Gothic house. As Candy stated the artwork cannot speak for itself, it must be contextualized. '[...] a critical appraisal or analysis that not only clarifies the basis of the claim for the originality and location of the work but also provides the basis for a judgement as to whether general scholarly requirements are met' (Candy, 65)¹⁸².

Although, it is worth noting that the novel (or artefact) and thesis are two halves of a whole, you cannot serve up one without the other. They both illuminate one another, and provide further insight in partnership together. They provide a chance to explore and evaluate the other half. As Candy explains 'In a practice-based context, the role of the artefact is viewed as central to the research process' (Candy 66)¹⁸³. And, 'A full understanding of the significance and context of the research can only be obtained by experience of the works created as distinguished from using them as illustrations' (Candy, 65)¹⁸⁴. Thus, my reader may ask these questions: how well does this writer know the South? How well has this writer used the South? What South has she chosen to re-create? Why was the Southern Gothic genre chosen for this project? What does the Southern Gothic genre allow the writer to do? Are there nascent insights floating just below the surface of the text that have not been fully realised? Are there unsupported leaps that lack precedence? Have the research questions been answered?

And while making this conjoined twin confection I had to contend with canon orthodoxy that states only native born Southerners can write the South; contested Southscapes; the Black Lives Matter movement alongside statues and 'history' coming

¹⁸² Ibid, p.65.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p.66.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p.65.

down. My novel, like the political climate, began to change. This project was affected by Southern history and current events. I had started writing *Three kids and a dead dog* in 2016, though I explored some of the ideas and themes in a short story in 2000. Below is an example of later influence, or interference, in my process. My research felt like learning another language within which I intended to write.

Kate Cochran on Confederate monuments: quotes Mitch Landrieu defending his position to remove four Confederate memorials in New Orleans ‘[...] I want to gently peel people’s hands off a false narrative of history’ (Landrieu in Cochran).¹⁸⁵.

The practice-based PhD, because of its fluid or maybe ill-defined structure, allowed me the scope to stumble upon collage and intuition as a methodology, and use incoming news stories about societal change. I created an accompanying scrapbook as a way to learn about rivers, boats, guns, catfish and back roads, and to chart my academic thinking filtered through key thinkers in my field. Through assembling an eclectic collage, ideas and themes became sticky. For example, while working at Waterstones I discovered new novels and books like J.D Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* and Beth Macy’s *Truevine, two brothers, a kidnapping and a mother’s quest: a true story of the American South* (2017). These were books I may have missed had I not been stacking shelves. Such discoveries and insights were absorbed into the scrapbook.

I was navigating via creative intuition which according to the OED is the ability to understand something immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning. ‘It is that psychological function which transmits perceptions in an unconscious way’ (Jung, 567-

¹⁸⁵ Kate Cochran, *Thoughts on Confederate monuments* (Society for the Study of Southern Literature Facebook page, 15 August 2017) <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/333214576739807/?ref=bookmarks>> [accessed 17 August 2017].

568)¹⁸⁶. ‘Jung in the *Red Book* (1915-1932) discusses the concept of active imagination as springing from intuition’ (Jung in Pilard, 74)¹⁸⁷.

‘The fact that there is an in-between state between unconscious and consciousness is of importance for us because only this state allows the most extraordinary form of intuition’ (Pilard, 67)¹⁸⁸.

‘An intuitive type may learn to recognise intuitions systematically in order to follow them’ (Pilard, 80)¹⁸⁹.

I was following my intuition systematically for example: by ‘reading the South’ and doing what Stephen King describes as excavating the story rather than contriving.

‘I lean more heavily on intuition [...]’ (King, 189)¹⁹⁰. And: ‘Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer’s job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible’ (King, 188)¹⁹¹.

A drawback with this intuition approach is it may be difficult to ‘prove’ to the academy. However, my novel and thesis (and scrapbook) serve as the result or product of intuitive research. They are logs of my process and evidence of 5 years of research. Also collage is now an arts-based methodology within the academy. There is even a Southern link too, which feels like synergy. According to collage scrapbook research by Vanessa Steinroetter:

¹⁸⁶ C.G. Jung, *Psychological types or the psychology of individuation* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1923), pp.567-568.

¹⁸⁷ Nathalie Pilard, ‘C.G. Jung and intuition: from the mindscape of the paranormal to the heart of psychology’, *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 63.1 (2018), p.74.
<doi:10.1111/1468-5922.12380> [accessed 27 May 2020]

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.67.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.80.

¹⁹⁰ Stephen King, *On writing, a memoir of the craft* (UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), p.189.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.188.

‘During the Civil War, many Americans on both sides of the conflict collected poems and articles that they had clipped from newspapers and pasted into the pages of a scrapbook’ (Steinroetter, 421)¹⁹².

Such scrapbooks were not just attempts by families to hold on to hope, information and memorials. These adjacencies of poems and prayers, newspaper articles and photographs became creative acts.

[...] as Ellen Gruber Garvey has shown, the acts of selecting, cutting, arranging, and pasting clippings from newspapers were akin to a form of “writing” – “with scissors” (Steinroetter, 423)¹⁹³.

My ‘writing with scissors’ was an attempt to gain some sort of control over a huge amount of information, as well as digesting it and making it my own. I needed to own the South. It was also a way of building up a portfolio on the Southern Gothic. There were pages of lonely country roads and trailers, muscle cars and guns, and my own score sheet from a shotgun session. The gun was very heavy, kicked like a mule and I failed to hit anything. There were pictures of dogs and rivers, catfish and gators. There was a double page spread on Hoodoo and mummified foetuses. All of which formed the basis of my novel planning and story excavation. I included the blueprint of a Gothic house floorplan; each room came to represent a different section of my thinking: A Bakhtin basement, a Hoodoo hallway... According to Steinroetter many of the scrapbooks in the South were attempting to perform ‘Confederate citizenship’. Recent immigrants to the South and Jewish families felt the need to flag up their Southern credentials. I too was performing

¹⁹² Vanessa Steinroetter, ‘Vacant chairs and absent bodies: material disruptions of domestic spaces in a Southern scrapbook’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 70.4 (2017) <doi:10.135/mss.2017.0032> [accessed 31 July 2020], p.421.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, p.423.

my academic writer citizenship of the South. Thus, a working knowledge of Hoodoo and Gullah became important.

14 Hoodoo as organising tool

I used Hoodoo as a syncretic tool to gather and choose my materials for my collage of research. As a Hoodoo practitioner gathers roots and herbs for headaches, inflammation and childbirth I was gathering sources and knowledge. This snowballing process by which academics follow leads mentioned in relevant journals led me to scour references and bibliographies for my next step. Hoodoo was also historically important in my region of the Southern United States.

‘[...] Hoodoo is the folk, spiritual controlling, and healing tradition originating among and practiced primarily, but not exclusively, by captive African Americans and their descendants primarily in the Southern United States’ (Hazzard-Donald, 2)¹⁹⁴. And: ‘[...] Ralph R. Kuna defined Hoodoo as the indigenous medicine and psychiatry of the black American (Hazzard-Donald, 2)¹⁹⁵.

I needed to know about Hoodoo influences and practices. Hoodoo provided a structure for my novel where the children consciously and unconsciously engage in Hoodoo practices they have absorbed as part of their cultural heritage, from the cultural ether. I wanted to use each element of Hoodoo practice without always flagging them explicitly for the reader. I wanted them to feel organic to the Southscape, rather than a list of cultural events. This was an attempt, not at local colour writing, but to appear as if the text had bubbled up naturally in the South rather than as if an outsider (or tourist) was excited by exotic and ‘foreign’ ceremonies.

‘And like many West and Central West African traditional religions, the Hoodoo religion involved spirit possession, ancestor reverence, water immersion, herbal medicine, sacred music, circle dancing, and shaman religious priests who

¹⁹⁴ Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’, The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p.2.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.2.

functioned in a variety of roles, including that of leader in religious activity such as role model in the sacred ritual of the ring shout' (Hazzard-Donald, 3).¹⁹⁶.

'The function of any belief system is to make sense of experience and reality' (Hazzard-Donald, 3).¹⁹⁷. I used Hoodoo to make sense of my PhD experience and reality by using the gathering methods to build my research. The concepts were my root work and herbs as it were. The conjure was putting it all together in a skilled way to create my novel. I am mindful of the charge of cultural appropriation. But I endeavored to use Hoodoo in its cultural context as a key element rather than as exotic decoration. And Hoodoo itself effectively borrowed from elsewhere such as Native American wisdom and practices:

'Though the full complement of contributions by Native Americans to old tradition Hoodoo may never be recounted, the herbal healing aspect of Hoodoo is probably heavily influenced by Native American custom, knowledge and tradition. The belief that Native American practice contributed directly to Hoodoo development is widespread, but little evidence is offered to support that assertion' (Hazzard-Donald, 7).¹⁹⁸.

In a similar way I used writers and thinkers that had gone before me to build my knowledge of the South, Southern Gothic and the Gothic as the early arrivals of enslaved peoples in the Americas did combining a rich West African and Central African heritage with local Native American know-how of plants that heal and harm.

'John Berendt, in his best-selling novel *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, [1999] introduces the reader to a character named Minerva, a Hoodoo woman, alleged in the novel to have been Dr. Buzzard's mistress... Her use in the novel is a pivotal point in this story filled with local color. For these five authors—Chesnutt, Faulkner, Twain, Heyward, and Berendt—as well as numerous others such as Ismael Reed, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, Hoodoo as an important element in their portrayals deepens and enriches their characters, setting and

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p.3.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p.3.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, p.7.

tone and reveals a deeply informative and essential cultural element rarely seen today by outsiders to working-class black life' (Hazzard-Donald, 89).¹⁹⁹.

Some commentators may have a problem with a white, middle-class, middle-aged writer from the UK using Hoodoo as a method and as a significant part of her novel. However, I have done my research to apply this spiritual practice respectfully and I believe, accurately. Hoodoo is not used for exotic literary thrills. It is an important element that deepens and enriches my research methodology and my characters, setting and tone.

Hoodoo as an element relates to Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, in that the biographical time of the characters is linked to historical time through Hoodoo practices. There is a connection with my journey as a writer and researcher. There is biographical time illustrated by my development as a writer on this project. And there is historical time in my reading and use of Katherina Hazzard-Donald's historical research into Hoodoo taking us across the South and back into the past. This history that is being re-examined by contemporary black academics and writers excavating much that was hidden, ignored or misinterpreted. This is fundamental to good writing and accurate research as Morson states: 'When time is only an intensified present essentially disconnected from the past, then a rich sense of biographical and historical continuity must be missing' (Morson, 106).²⁰⁰.

This change is illustrated by poet Honorée Fanonne Jeffers' essay on the poet Phillis Wheatley's husband. Jeffers (native of North Carolina and Georgia) explains that most of what was known about this early black poet was written by a white woman Margaretta

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p.89.

²⁰⁰ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and freedom, the shadow of time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p.106.

Matilda Odell about 50 years after the poet's death. Wheatley was born in West Africa, enslaved as a child and then later owned by a family in Boston, Massachusetts. Odell wrote with an abolitionist's intent but portrayed the white owners of Wheatley as good people and her black husband as a bad lot who led to Wheatley's early death, according to Jeffers. However, Jeffers does her own research and then reframes John Peters (Wheatley's husband) through the lens of the eighteenth century: '[...] smart, hardworker, trying his hand in different business enterprises...' (Jeffers, 75)²⁰¹. And then setting this evidence against the lens of '[...] a white woman of the nineteenth century Odell fits perfectly with her era too. It doesn't take much speculation to deduce that she believed Peters to be an uppity Negro' (Jeffers, 76)²⁰². It took a black academic to ask questions and re-consider this dubious and taken-for-granted narrative. Biographical time is indeed linked to historical time, in fiction and the academy. Odell it would seem was a product of her time and class. A contemporary black writer may well have drawn different conclusions as Jeffers did later. As a white outsider I am always trying to be mindful of gaps and elisions in my creative process. Intuition and collage may be affected and limited by unconscious bias. Hoodoo knowledge added another dimension to my novel and more cultural depth. It also became a guiding method for my collage building and for structuring my work, carried out with respect and cultural insight. This process led to an insight or discovery about the Southern Gothic literary landscape.

²⁰¹ Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, "'The dear pledges of our love': a defence of Phillis Wheatley's husband' in Jesmyn Ward (ed). *The fire this time, a new generation speaks about race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p.75.

²⁰² Ibid, p.76.

15 The Southern Gothic Southscape is a Gothic house

After writing an early draft of my novel I did research on the Gothic and Southern Gothic, to improve the depth of my next draft. I considered what Gothic and Southern Gothic elements to include and how to manage key tropes that are so well used they had become worn clichés. Then I narrowed my focus to houses in the Gothic because of their centrality to Gothic storytelling. I too, had included a significant house in my novel. Coeur D’Alene was an uninhabitable Gothic ruin. Consequently my characters lived in a trailer. However, the house and its past cast a long shadow over their lives and the story world.

The Gothic house in literature is a venue for the story events, part of the symbol web and a character itself. It also has its own chronotope. According to Anne Williams:

‘A house makes secrets in merely being itself, for its function is to enclose spaces. And the larger, older, and more complex the structure becomes, the more likely it is to have secret or forgotten rooms’ (Williams, 45-46).²⁰³.

‘The imposing house with a terrible secret is surely one—possibly the “central” characteristic of the category “Gothic” in its early years’ (Williams, 39).²⁰⁴.

I argue the Gothic house is still a central characteristic of the Gothic and of Southern Gothic. But something else was afoot in Southern Gothic texts. After extensive research it became clear that the Southscape (outside of the house) manifested and contained all the characteristics of a Gothic house. The Gothic ‘house’ had moved outside.

‘Montague Summers exclaimed [:] the castles were the real protagonists of the early Gothics’ (Williams, 39).²⁰⁵. In Southern Gothic there are no castles. But there are grandiose plantation houses. Such houses are characters and they supplant the European castle. One

²⁰³ Anne Williams, *Art of darkness, a poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.45-46.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.39.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.39.

house illustrates this point well; it was even nicknamed Goat Castle by the locals. In a true crime book Karen L. Cox (2017) tells the story of a 1932 murder committed by two eccentric white neighbours living in squalor in an antebellum manor house filled with horded debris and goats, in Natchez, Mississippi. A local black woman Emily Burns was wrongly convicted of the crime and sent to the notorious Parchman penitentiary (Cox, 98-107).²⁰⁶.

However, whereas bodies are stacked up in dungeons below medieval castle flagstones in the traditional fictional Gothic, in the South such events frequently took place in reality, outside and were often public spectacles. Using the lens of literature we can see that in European Gothic the decaying dynasty was trying to bury or hide its transgressive past, not necessarily due to shame, but because it was a shrewd way to gull the unwary traveller into its maw. In the South under slavery, and later 'Reconstruction' (sic), Jim Crow practices were intended as social control and keeping the status quo intact. Therefore they 'needed' to be very public. Lynching, Ku Klux Klan cross burnings, post cards and picnics were common and well attended racist public spectacles.

In *Writing Popular Fiction* (1973), Dean R. Koontz advised would-be authors about Gothic settings. He asserted that 'the ancient mansion permeated with evil should be as much a character in your story as any people in it' (Koontz, 126).²⁰⁷. In the American South back country roads, trees and rivers are all permeated with evil if a writer or visitor overlays the racist murder of teenager Emmett Till in 1955; the murders by locals and law enforcement officers of the Civil Rights Freedom Summer workers Andrew Goodman, James Earl Chaney, Michael Henry Schwerner in 1964 and more recently Sandra Bland

²⁰⁶ Karen L. Cox, 'The Grey Gardens of the South', *Southern Cultures*, 25.4 (2019), pp.98-107.

²⁰⁷ Dean R. Koontz, Dean R. *Writing popular fiction* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 1973), p.126.

pulled over in Texas and three days later ‘found hanging’ in a police cell in 2015. The Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted many more contemporary examples.

Williams asks: ‘[...] how can the haunted house be both “central” and unnecessary to Gothic?’ (Williams, 39)²⁰⁸. In Southern Gothic you do not need, as a writer, to create a creaking mansion because your story is already in one. The South does have some rotting plantation houses, Civil War ruins and hurricane destruction mildewed in tropical decay that could be used by a writer of the European Gothic tradition. However, from the earliest Southern and American Gothic the landscape filled in the lacuna left by the European castle.

There is a ruined plantation in *Three Kids and a dead dog*. However, it is just a busted façade; it’s broken back a gaping hole opening onto the wild and carnivorous wilderness. And Koontz suggests that ‘Variations on the house might be: a steamboat used as a dwelling, archaeological diggings in a strange country, or a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the 18th Century. Anything used in place of the old house should have the same qualities of it: isolation, gloominess, an air of mystery, lots of dark places, eerie corridors, and musty rooms’ (Koontz, 126)²⁰⁹. Thus, eerie corridors are dirt roads at twilight and musty rooms become stale, isolated towns. ‘Koontz’s advice is practical: he wants to teach his reader how to write marketable Gothic fiction. And from this perspective, specific décor is not as important as the setting’s power to evoke certain responses in the characters (and in the reader): claustrophobia, loneliness, a sense of antiquity, recognition that this is a place of secrets. Such a setting activates the “Gothic” dynamic between image

²⁰⁸ Anne Williams, *Art of darkness, a poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.39.

²⁰⁹ Dean R. Koontz, Dean R. *Writing popular fiction* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest, 1973), p.126.

and affect, as well, presumably, as the use of particular kinds of plots, excites curiosity' (Koontz in Williams, 39-40).²¹⁰.

In the literature of the American South, and Southern Gothic literature in particular, the Southscape (the outside) becomes a Gothic house. The troubles European characters had trapped in Gothic houses moved outside for American characters and for my own. I used Rose Lovell-Smith's typography of the Gothic house as a springboard and planning tool because she identified 'three remarkably persistent features of the Gothic house [...]' First,

'Kate Ferguson Ellis, in [...] *The Contested Castle* [...]: "[What] we call the Gothic novel can be distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out"' (Lovell-Smith, 101).²¹¹.

Lovell-Smith also identifies a labyrinthine extensiveness (the house or here the Southscape is bigger on the inside than the outside), and third remoteness and isolation. I have added two more to this typology: haunted-ness and decay alongside decadence; as they can be found across the Southern Gothic literary chronotope as tropes, as structuring devices and for Southern narrative coherence. These became a planning tool as I reviewed my story arc and they also led to a clearer more focused re-writing of scenes.

Tartt's *The Little Friend* provided detailed textual examples to enable my understanding to reach a new depth and key texts were always in dialogue with *Three Kids and a dead dog* while I was writing. In *The Little Friend* the Southscape is indeed extensive as Tartt takes us through a labyrinth of affluent 'burbs, the pool hall, Tribulation (the ruined

²¹⁰ Anne Williams, *Art of darkness, a poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp.39-40.

²¹¹ Rose Lovell-Smith, 'On the Gothic beach: a New Zealand reading of house and landscape in Margaret Mahy's *The tricksters*. in *The Gothic children's literature, haunting the borders* (eds). by Anna Jackson, Karen Coates and Roderick McGillis (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.101.

plantation), the country club, Lake De Selby (an earnest and unsavoury children's summer camp), the water tower, the woods, and a trailer compound; and going back into the past by way of the Confederate Cemetery.

Tartt's writing draws us into a labyrinth that appears to lead nowhere apart from back into the past. The Confederate Cemetery which stands as a Southern place marker for the 'Lost Cause', nostalgia and a yearning that things should be very different, at least for the likes of the affluent 'old' Southern families, such as Harriet's aunties. And there too was the 'awful past' of those like Newt Knight, no respecter of property rights and local grandees, harbingers of Yankee soldiers, Sherman's March to the Sea, Reconstruction and Civil Rights. Aunt Eddie still feels threatened by the likes of Newt Knight; this echoes Harriet's feelings of terror that the Ratliff family will find out who she is and come after her. The summer camp is a dead-end in the labyrinth, but probably a good place to hide-out. The oddballs who run it are creepy but they are not killers.

Tartt does appear to be digressing into 'local colour' writing with references to hot-tamale shacks and hard Italian cookies. And Tartt has been criticised for her excessive detail. Critic John Freeman entitled his review of *The little friend* 'Southern Gothic, smothered in kudzu' stating Tartt's book '[...] crawls along like an August afternoon in the Delta' (Freeman)²¹² because of its '[...] many stops along the way to note the flora and fauna of Mississippi with arboretum-level specificity' (Freeman)²¹³. He makes the same point about the people or characters. Tartt's book is very long, but it is also an immersive experience, we readers are swamped in the Southscape. It is difficult to extricate

²¹² John Freeman, 'Review/books: Southern Gothic, smothered in Kudzu', *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 2002 <<http://ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/docview/accountid=14557>> [accessed 1 September 2017].

²¹³ Ibid.

ourselves. But we have entered the labyrinth with Harriet and her friend Hely. Some readers may get so lost in the textual labyrinth; they stop reading before the novel is finished.

I will now consider the other elements of isolation and remoteness: '[...] in a lonely, rural, perhaps wild and uncivilized, even desolate, setting' (Lovell-Smith, 101)²¹⁴. I Tartt we find this example:

'Dogs were barking—big dogs, but far away. To the South of the depot were the lights of the lumberyard and, further back, the friendly streetlamps of their own neighbourhood. Turning their backs upon these last glimmers of civilization, they headed off resolutely in the opposite direction—into outer darkness, and the broad, flat, uninhabited wastes stretching off to the north, past dead freight yards with their open boxcars and empty cotton wagons, and towards a narrow gravel path vanishing into black pine woods. Harriet and Hely had played along this isolated road—which led to the abandoned cotton warehouse—but not often. The woods were still and frightening; even in broad daylight the gloomy footpath—choked to a thread—was always dark beneath the dense, vine-strangled canopy of ailanthus, stunted sweetgum, and pine. The air was damp and unwholesome, whining with mosquitos [...]. Several years ago, it had sheltered a team of convicts escaped from a chain gang' (Tartt, 311).²¹⁵.

I have chosen substantial examples, to fully illustrate Tartt's method of creating the Southscape. Such examples give a sense of the volume of detail in *The little friend* and thus an almost physical experience of reading, wading through the novel. When he reviewed the novel in his article entitled: *Poisonous possibilities: telling stories and telling ruins in Donna Tartt's The little friend* (2015) Edward Clough used the concept synecdoche to

²¹⁴ Rose Lovell-Smith, 'On the Gothic beach: a New Zealand reading of house and landscape in Margaret Mahy's *The tricksters*. in *The Gothic children's literature, haunting the borders* (eds). by Anna Jackson, Karen Coates and Roderick McGillis (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.101.

²¹⁵ Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p.311.

describe Tartt's novel: as a 'synecdoche of the "South"' (Clough, 330)²¹⁶. These examples are a synecdoche of Tartt's novel but also stand as a synecdoche of Tartt's South, and I argue a synecdoche (or part that represents the whole) of the Southscape.

Decay and decadence is evident when some local white men shoot at black men and women fishing on the river bank, witnessed by Harriet's friend Hely:

"It was a real gun, Harriet. Real bullets, Niggers [sic] running everywhere—"
(Tartt, 119)²¹⁷.

'The three of them were sitting at the lone picnic table behind Jumbo's Drive-In, on a concrete slab next to a forlorn pair of kiddie rides: a circus elephant and a faded yellow duck, on springs. They had driven around in the Cadillac—aimlessly, all three of them in the front seat—for about ten minutes, no air-conditioning and about to roast with the top up, before Pem finally pulled in at Jumbo's ' (Tartt, 252)²¹⁸.

This example feeds into the stereotype of 'white trash' or poor whites, attacking working class black folks trying to survive. Such events are not without historical precedent. However, it hovers on the edge of a dangerous reactionary politics that lays the blame for racism and Jim Crow at the door of the poor and largely powerless, and not with those affluent privileged legislators who benefitted materially and socially from divisions and inequality. For this reason the working class whites are not demonised or the enemy in my novel. It is the rich and entitled Clay who is the real villain, though this might be missed by some due to the halo effect created by his good looks and wealth. Clay's daughter is even named Halo. However, Clay does not see that she is aptly named, being a decent girl carrying Gullah culture of her enslaved ancestors intuitively forward. Her

²¹⁶ Edward Clough, 'Poisonous possibilities: telling stories and telling ruins in Donna Tartt's 'The little friend'', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 68.3-4 (2015) <<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/results?vid=3&sid=45520031-bd87-4395-8722->> [accessed 4 January 2018], p.330.

²¹⁷ Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p.119.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.252.

name is not mere decoration or aspiration. Clay does not perceive this because he is blinded by his 'elite white narrative', a useful label from Clough (Clough, 330).²¹⁹.

In Tartt hauntedness is achieved by an out of focus photograph taken of Robin before he dies, strung up a tree resembling a lynching:

'In the corner of the frame a blurred shadow of Robin, his back to the viewer, ran out across the hazy lawn to meet his death, which stood waiting for him—almost visible—in the dark place beneath the tupelo tree' (Tartt, 7).²²⁰.

'Gladly, the cobra slipped into the high weeds of the cow pasture, into the heat and vegetation not unlike that of its native land, away into the fable and legend of the town. In India, it had hunted on the outskirts of villages and cultivated areas (slipping into grain bins at twilight, feeding upon rats) and it adapted with alacrity to the barns and corncribs and garbage dumps of its new home. For years to come, farmers and hunters and drunks would sight the cobra; curiosity seekers would attempt to hunt it down, and photograph or kill it; and many, many tales of mysterious death would hover about its silent, lonely path' (Tartt, 332).²²¹.

Here we have the Southscape haunted by lynching's long shadow. It is impossible to view the South without some awareness of its bloody history and its bloody present. Tartt also haunts her Southscape in a humorous way with the giant snake appearing now and again like a mythical beast to farmers, hunters and drunks. This is believable, it is warm enough for the Indian cobra to survive and there will be plenty of small mammals for it to eat. Though, there is a lingering haunting fear it may snatch a pet dog or child one day.

These extracts illustrate the key elements within the Southern Gothic literary Southscape that make it a Gothic house, trapping and menacing Harriet and Hely. This

²¹⁹ Edward Clough, 'Poisonous possibilities: telling stories and telling ruins in Donna Tartt's 'The little friend'', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 68.3-4 (2015) <<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/results?vid=3&sid=45520031-bd87-4395-8722->> [accessed 4 January 2018], p.330.

²²⁰ Donna Tartt, *The little friend* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p.5.

²²¹ *Ibid*, p.332.

chronotope is where the narrative knots are tied, untied and retied. These elements are indeed the organizing centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel as Bakhtin theorised.

After reading the South through Tarrt and other writers already mentioned I began to re-consider my novel. I wrote several rough drafts developing my story, ‘uncovering’ events and adding or subtracting characters. It is a haphazard process drawing on one’s intuition and cultural influences. However, I now had the key elements to consider. These elements became a structuring device, and put simply I had to ask myself had I included them?

I repurposed Lovell-Smith’s typology to analyse and identify the key features of the Southscape. I used this in conjunction with Williams’ Gothic overview of the centrality of castles and houses in the Gothic. I also used Koontz’ writing advice on writing evil highlighting that a setting’s power must evoke certain Gothic responses of claustrophobia, loneliness, a sense of antiquity, and recognition that this is a place of secrets. I translated their theories into practice, making them writing tools. The Southscape as Gothic house became what John Truby, in his how to write book *The anatomy of story, 22 steps to becoming a master storyteller* (2008) calls the symbol web. ‘The symbol web shows a deeper reality about how the world works by referring objects, people, and actions to other objects, people and actions’ (Truby, 221).²²².

The elements needed to become what Truby refers to as a condenser-expander (Truby, 220).²²³. He argues the symbol: ‘[...] is highly concentrated meaning’ (Truby,

²²² John Truby, *The anatomy of story, 22 steps to becoming a master storyteller* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), p.221.

²²³ *Ibid*, p.220.

220)²²⁴ such as a burning cross on someone's front lawn. Revisiting the text was also a chance to interrogate my theory that in Southern Gothic, the Gothic had moved outside in daylight. The dark and stormy night events disappeared. Could I introduce the elements in a credible, coherent way? The long, increasingly remote road leading to Coeur D'Alene created a sense of isolation. The busted facade of the ruined plantation house conveyed decay and decadence with its links to an unsavoury antebellum past. Dolls nailed to trees on Doll Island haunted the children and the Southscape, something they were dimly aware of even before they saw them. The flash flood trapped the children, locking them into the Southscape and out of 'civilisation'. The local bridge was temporarily shut due to high water. As a result they were beyond rescue. And the Empty land became a labyrinth, strewn with weird debris and washed out roads.

Following Koontz' advice on Gothic images creating an affect, I attempted to use the oppressive heat and wetness to create a sense of claustrophobia. Waker is an outsider who cannot fully connect with her kin. She is always a little apart and lonely even when immersed in their adventures. The sense of antiquity is not achieved through the usual Gothic furniture of knight's armour and gloomy moats. It is achieved through scripture scrawled on rotting walls and Hoodoo practices originally from Africa, our ancestral human home. What can be older than the crib of human evolution? As to a place of secrets: there is a face in the trees startling Waker when she first arrives. This takes place not on a dark and stormy night but in broad daylight.

²²⁴ Ibid, p.220.

16 Daylight Gothic

When I assembled my key elements to create my Southscape I made another key decision. Why not really emphasise these tropes by setting the main events in daylight? There was to be some action in the dim basement of Coeur D'Alene but I placed most key events outside in daylight. They were no longer in an enclosed space, hiding secrets but out in the open, in the full glare of the noonday sun. This is an interesting experiment. And according to Alexandra Harris in *Weatherland* (2016) 'Fiction, like science, is good at testing out hypotheses' (Harris, 382)²²⁵. Would the events be creepy in broad daylight?

The altercation with Clay leading to Pearl's death, the fight with Clay on the river, the gruesome discovery of Doll Island and meeting feral Cousin Velvet, even falling into the basement all take place in daylight. Similarly in Tartt's *The Little Friend* the children wander the neighbourhood, steal a cobra and tip it into a car travelling under a highway bridge all in daylight. Using daylight adds a dimension of realism because in reality most children are not allowed to roam outside in the middle of the night, unlike the usual Gothic protagonist. And it is always a big mistake to undertake creepy investigations at night: people get molested and killed by ghosts or vampires. In King's novel *Salem's Lot* his protagonists wait until dark to try to kill off vampires, which of course, means most of the characters are then themselves killed. Surely, it would make more sense to go in daylight when the vampires were sleeping (and disabled by the sunlight) to hack off their heads? This surely makes better survival sense? And it would be no less a good story *if* people acted in a 'realistic' way rather than one designed to tip the plot in a particular direction.

²²⁵ Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland, writers and artists under English skies* (UK: Thames and Hudson, 2016), p.382.

There are many tropes that can be employed by a writer creating a Gothic night scene. But these tropes are too well-worn, many border on cliché. It was an interesting challenge to make daylight spooky and eerie. In the dark it is about what you cannot see becoming scary, and monstrous. However, in the daylight it is not about creaking floorboards and shadows under the bed but about what you *can* see, dolls nailed to trees and menacing graffiti. It is about the Empty being empty, where there is no one to rescue you.

The term 'Daylight Gothic' was coined by Mark Shorer (Zacharias, 343)²²⁶ describing Truman Capote's short story *Children on their birthdays* (2011) which starts with the line 'Yesterday afternoon the six o'clock bus ran over Miss Bobbit' (Zacharias, 343).²²⁷ The horrible event takes place in daylight and is all the worse for it. The precocious child Miss Bobbit rushes across the road to gather up flowers, like a canny old actress from two young admirers. 'You could see what was going to happen; and we called out, our voices like lightening in the rain [...]' (Zacharias, 350).²²⁸ Miss Bobbit is oblivious and killed instantly. I wanted to create a scary place but one where the corners in my novel are in plain sight and all the more awful for it. There is no shady shadowy reprieve.

An illustrative example of Daylight Gothic is the Borden murders. In an article entitled *New England Gothic by the light of common day* [...] (1997) Bradley S. Shaw²²⁹ considers provincial Gothic writings surrounding the infamous true case of the brutal 1892 double

²²⁶ Lee Zacharias, 'Living the American dream: 'Children on their Birthdays'', *Lee Studies in Short Fiction*, 12.4 (1975) <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1297935519?rft_id=info%3Aaxri%2Fsid%3Aprimo> [accessed 19 August 2018], p.343.

²²⁷ Ibid, p.343.

²²⁸ Ibid, p.350.

²²⁹ Bradley S. Shaw, 'New England Gothic by the light of common day: Lizzie Borden and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 'The long arm'', *The New England Quarterly*, 70.2 (1997) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/366701>> [accessed 5 May 2019].

axe murder [very probably?] committed by the daughter of one of Falls River's first families in Massachusetts, Lizzie Andrew Borden. Although, the theme in the title 'by the light of common day' is not explored in the article I have used it as a springboard. The Borden murders are a dramatic and disturbing example of Daylight Gothic. Lizzie, it would seem, was able to hack her father and stepmother to death neatly around her domestic duties then called on her oblivious maid Bridget 'Maggie' Sullivan to help with the 'tidy up' shortly after. Although, these events took place inside they fit well into Daylight Gothic. One can imagine the hard, bright protestant New England light filtering through the large windows of the Borden's roomy clapboard house. The crime scene photographs are chilling in their bland domesticity. There are no dark corners here.

Daylight Gothic also led me to use summer, and the summer holidays, as a framing device. Summer is a time of long, light days, oppressive heat and children outdoors going feral. In an article for *The Guardian* (2018) Aida Edemariam writes about summer as framing device for some novels because it would appear to have its own time (Edemariam, 8)²³⁰. It has its own chronotope distinct from winter. Hurricanes, sexual indiscretion and decadent behaviour blooms because of the broiling sun. People are undone by the heat and dissolving boundaries. 'In summer people wear fewer clothes, see more of each other. Things grow into ripeness, which is exciting but also threatening' (Edemariam, 10)²³¹. Writing events into the summer daylight intensifies them.

'Prolonged hot spells in England have tended in the past to arouse suspicion. Tensions rise, and agitation set in... [Heatwaves] pushed English lives out of

²³⁰ Aida Edemariam, 'Notes on a heatwave', *The Saturday Guardian Review*, Aug. 4 2018, p.8.

²³¹ *Ibid*, p.10.

their natural element, and that was what fascinated novelists. They offered forms of alluring strangeness [...]’ (Harris, 364).²³².

As an English writer I may have an advantage in feeling the Southern climate as exotic, claustrophobic and discombobulating. The heat is not something we can take for granted in our (in) temperate climate. The thoughts about people being undone by the heat may apply more to Northern Europeans and writers in particular, unused to the heat. I detest the heat, it is oppressive and debilitating. Menacing flowers and insects grow large and threatening. Heat in summer often defines the South in literature. It is a synecdoche for the South and is thus fundamental to writing a credible authentic South. But it is also a shorthand or cliché. Although, heat needs to be a presence in my text I have to ensure it is not merely a hackneyed descriptor. However, there was another presence I had to reckon with: the opinion of canonical writers and key thinkers on the South; and the traces of writers who had gone before me.

²³² Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland, writers and artists under English skies* (UK: Thames and Hudson, 2016), p.364.

17 Discourse, mythology and the death of the South

Before concluding it is important to consider some of the discourses and controversies surrounding Southern fiction and the Southern canon in general. Katy Simpson-Smith in the article *Why my students don't call themselves 'Southern' writers, on reckoning with a fraught literary history* in 2019, described her students' impatience and frustration as they considered the Southern field. 'At the end of a lacklustre discussion [...] what my students saw was a reflection not of the world they lived in, but the world they inherited. And although we Southerners are unendingly proud of our literary heritage, it bears the marks of a brutality we're struggling to move past' (Simpson-Smith)²³³. The students were tired and befuddled by Faulkner, though it should be noted Simpson-Smith still talks about 'we Southerners' as if these problems and debates still only belong to those native to the South. For these students the likes of Faulkner were very stale or just so old fashioned they barely made sense. Instead it might have been more productive to start by asking the students what being a Southerner or literary Southerner meant to them and then asking them to prepare a reading list reflecting that. This might include a Flannery O'Connor short story alongside novels by Jarred McGinnis, Regina Porter, Robert Jones, Jr and Delia Owens 'bestseller' *Where the crawdads sing*. Otherwise there is a self-fulfilling prophecy or echo chamber effect excluding writers of colour and those from the LGBTQ+ community to cite just two examples.

Simpson-Smith asks '[...] So should we still teach our giants, cliché as they may now seem? Of course: to love the buds, we must know the roots. But to honor the roots, teach

²³³ Literary Hub, *Literary Hub: Katy Simpson Smith on why my students don't call themselves 'Southern' writers, on reckoning with a fraught literary history* (2019)

<<https://lithub.com/why-my-students-dont-call-themselves-southern-writers/>> [accessed 10 May 2020].

also the buds' (Simpson-Smith)²³⁴. As an outsider (and non-native) I needed to know about the Southern literary canon's 'roots' and 'buds'. I did not have the luxury of avoiding the likes of Faulkner and other key canonical writers. Faulkner can be obscure and infuriating, and he can be considered dated. However, he is a significant Southern writer. I had to read him alongside the 'usual suspects', Truman Capote, Caroline Gordon, Zora Neale Hurston, Nell Harper Lee, Carson McCullers, Margaret Mitchell, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, John Kennedy Toole, and Eudora Welty, (initially, an all-white reading list, apart from Zora Neale Hurston). These were the roots according to canon orthodoxy.

However, starting with these 'roots' I found 'Perhaps most problematic [of all] is the persistent assumption that "Southern literature" is produced only by Southern-born writers: a version of what I [Bone] have termed "the Quentessential fallacy". In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Quentin Compson's famous declaration to his Canadian friend Shreve McCannon that "You cant [sic] understand it [the U.S. South]. You would have to be born there" (Faulkner, in Bone 361)²³⁵ eerily anticipates the kind of Southern literary-critical nativism that precludes dialectical national or transnational perspectives from beyond the South—or even from within the South, by immigrant authors and protagonists' (Bone, 476)²³⁶. My intention in 'reading the South' was to use these writers as facilitators for my writing research process. I planned to use them to understand the initial Southern canon. I asked myself questions about the way these writers dealt with phenomena, and what they had in common. Was there a recognisable Southern way or method which I should

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Martyn Bone, 'You don't have to be born there: immigration and contemporary fiction of the U.S. South'. in *The Oxford handbook of the literature of the U.S. South* (eds). Fred Hobson and Barbara Ladd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.361.

²³⁶ Ibid, p.476.

adopt? I included more contemporary and diverse writers to the above list to gain more insight and awareness. Clearly there is far more to Southern literature than a small group of mostly affluent white men. Were contemporary black women writers such as Regina Porter, Angie Thomas or Olympia Vernon using some common Southern conventions? Could I borrow or recycle repeated elements in my writing?

Faulkner, Nobel laureate and thus giant of the Southern canon, even had his protagonist state in *Absalom, Absalom!* you have to be a Southerner to write and understand the South, meaning in any authentic, credible way. This is often quoted whenever Southern literature is discussed, implying that *only* those who were born in the South are allowed to write the South. M.O. Walsh as recently as 2015 re-stated this gatekeeping dogma. ‘Show me a Southern Gothic novel written by someone who’s not from the South and the odds are that I’ll show you a bad novel’ (Walsh)²³⁷. The Southern Gothic chronotope itself seems ‘owned’ by native Southern writers who are the only writers considered able enough to create an authentic Southern Gothic chronotope, or should be allowed to do so. I was learning for Faulkner and M.O. Walsh et al. They were facilitators giving me access, through their texts, to the Southern canon and the South. But they, it would seem, were hostile or antagonistic to projects such as my own. I was on their turf and they did not want or believe a non-Southerner could craft a Southern novel. This was disheartening. They appeared to be hostile gatekeepers. However, after some rumination and further research, I decided not to let these white men have the last word

²³⁷ M.O. Walsh, ‘Why Southern Gothic rules the world’, *The Guardian*, July 4 2015
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/04/southern-Gothic-fiction-harper-lee-go-set-watchmen>>
[accessed 19 June 2017].

and exclude me. I discovered other diverse Southern writers and a few non-Southern writers writing the South, such as Afia Atakora, Joan Didion and Alice Randall.

According to Emma McCracken's²³⁸ thesis considering writers from the 1950s to 2019 '[Contemporary Southern] writers are contributing to a more global discussion of literature in a way that preserves the distinctly Southern sense of place, while developing Southern characters that often make forward-thinking decisions for the time in which their stories take place'. This gave me hope. There was still a recognisable Southern style of writing holding on to with a clear sense of place; including contemporary and diverse voices and perspectives. However, they are still for the majority *native born* writers. That excludes me and will always exclude me. This may make my writing ground-breaking: a non-Southerner writing the South or ersatz nonsense, an inferior substitute for something else. It is for my readers and peers to decide.

There is still a strong overwhelming bias towards only Southern writers writing the South. In 2020 the *Southern Cultures* journal interviewed twenty-one contemporary Southern writers. They were all from the South and all but two still live in the Southern United States. They were asked was there a "quality of Southernness" in 21st-century Southern fiction? The writers reflected on their own creative output, many argued that place was fundamental in their writing. This was reassuring because I too was focusing on place as a distinct element or character. Though, again I felt excluded because they were all from the South and felt one had to be from the South to create [good] Southern literature, even if it reflected the New New South.

²³⁸ Emma McCracken, 'A change in Southern character through Southern characters' (Tiger Prints published thesis, Clemson University, 2019).

‘[...] it is the only thing I know. It is because my family has been on the same patch of ground since the late 1600s. And, in that way, it’s Southern’ (Joy).²³⁹

‘[...] What I DO trust though is a sense of place and a love of place even when that love is complicated by the acceptance of a lot of history we are ashamed of’ (McCorkle).²⁴⁰

‘It is still a literature specific to a region. Yet I’m open to accepting the reinvention of that landscape. This ain’t just the New South. This is the New New South’ (Perkins-Valdez).²⁴¹

There is a recognition that the South has changed, continues to change, but there is still a sense of a Southscape to utilise or exploit for these writers. This enabled my writing project, it gave me a way back in. I too could utilise the Southscape to build my novel. I was not trying to ventriloquize the South. And perhaps it is as Michael Knight writes ‘I wonder if the answer to this question is as much a result of literary influence as geographical identity. Not every “Southern” writer is doing Faulkner or O’Connor anymore, or writing place’ (Knight).²⁴² This gave me permission and confidence not to get too bogged down on a literal geographical identity. I drew on my Southern literacy influences instead. This included both literature and historical research, although rooted in geography or place, the Southscape.

The strong connection to the past is another marker of Southern writing, as *Southern Cultures* found in 2020. Although, this does emanate from the geography or more specifically the Southscape:

²³⁹ Allan Gurganus et al. ‘Twenty twenty-one’, *Southern Cultures*, 22.3 (2016) <doi: 10.1353/scu.2016.0031> [accessed 11 May 2020].

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

‘Southern writers can’t quite let go of the past, and I think that’s a good thing. [...] some of our youngest, newest voices cannot resist subscribing to the South’s complicated history...’ (Gingher).²⁴³

‘One of the best explanations I’ve heard, of what the American South is, was said by the late Reynolds Price. The South, he said, was an amalgam of the African American presence, a strong agricultural society, and the Protestant religion, and how these elements mixed and expressed themselves. [And contemporary writers] are aware of and informed by the past’ (Kenan).²⁴⁴

‘If there’s anything still binding Southern literature in this age of porousness, it’s probably graves [...] and] the demons that still gnaw at the edges of our memory’ (Simpson Smith).²⁴⁵

‘But I will always be a Southern writer, even after nearly thirty years in California’ (Allison).²⁴⁶

In the same article writers George Singleton, Michael Parker and Silas House discussed the global and local changes influencing the South, suggesting there is a New South [in life and literature], one that had moved on from ‘moonshine to marijuana to meth’ (Singleton). Those writing the South (and here I include myself) today may be writing about different themes or more contemporary content but the writing is still recognisably Southern, because of the attention to Southern place, albeit a New South. Although, Parker posited the question they were asked by *Southern Cultures*, is there a “quality of Southernness” in 21st-century Southern fiction, is irrelevant or obsolete. He argues this because as House explains,

‘The beauty of Southern fiction in this new century is that there is so much opportunity for complexity, so Many Souths. For the longest time only people in power had the opportunity to write about the South. But nowadays [...]

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

many other kinds of people have harnessed the power of words to articulate their own Souths' (House)²⁴⁷.

House and Parker are referencing local Southern writers from working class or Vietnamese backgrounds, such as Monique Truong who moved from Saigon to North Carolina at the age of six. Did this statement give me permission to join? I was trying to harness the power of words to articulate my own South. House and Parker still seem to be talking about those from the South and migrants who have lived there for some time, served their time; a kind of Southern apprenticeship? My type of project may not have occurred to them. And writer Nic Brown appears to exclude me by stating:

'[...] perhaps it's only the product of someone who has written about the South or in the South for so long and with such a level of success that their own work has begun to influence Southern culture itself' (Brown)²⁴⁸.

I have yet to get to the stage whereby my second novel is published. As a result I have yet to influence Southern culture. However, by writing a credible novel that could have come from the South may I have some influence in future? New writers at my writers' workshops may perceive possibilities beyond 'write what you know'. *Three kids and a dead dog* will be a novel out in the world, eventually. I still have anxiety about authenticity but I managed this by writing the South from an English visitor's perspective. My protagonist Waker is on the outside as I am too. We both attempt to burrow into the Southscape. The novel is a working out of this problem then.

Such a technique allows for some 'mistakes', inaccuracies or misunderstandings about the South. But it also allows for an outsider view where the ordinary: a truck, a road, a stop sign becomes interesting and charged with meaning. I did not want to be seen as

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

the writer equivalent of Jessica Krug or Rachel Dolezal. Though, I may be the equivalent of Blair and other afore-mentioned armchair travellers, which tends to undermine my authenticity. There was a huge amount of internet anger when Dolezal and Krug were found out. In a recent news story:

‘Behold the 2020 Rachel Dolezal. Jessica Krug has cancelled herself [...] after admitting she had spent the last decade pretending to be black. Krug is an associate professor at George Washington University (GWU); her self-described areas of expertise include Africa, African American History and colonialism. While she uses the name Krug to teach, she has also gone by Jess La Bombalera in activist circles, and described herself as “an unrepentant, unreformed child of the hood”. In reality she’s a white Jewish woman who was raised in the Kansas City suburbs’ (Mahdawi)²⁴⁹.

It would seem Krug did know about her chosen university subjects. She had gained a PhD and written a book. However, she appropriated blackness in a way that led to an augmentation of her career and a well-supported platform. For Arwa Mahdawi: ‘[...] she’s an extreme example of the insidious way in which blackness is routinely consumed and appropriated’ (Mahdawi)²⁵⁰. Looking back at news clips it is hard to believe those who hired her at George Washington University were taken in by such an inauthentic and inconsistent performance. I am not pretending to be a Southerner. But my text may be seen as pretending to be Southern. My text is a performance that needs to be skilled, consistent and based on good faith. I want to tell a great story set in the South. I respect the South, which is why I have done my homework. And I am not trying to pass myself off as something I am not for status, career or financial gain. I have considered conscientiously

²⁴⁹ Arwa Mahdawi, ‘Jessica Krug is a symptom of a bigger problem: the way blackness is appropriated’, *The Guardian* (2020) <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/docview/2440316845?accountid=14557&rfr_id=info%3Axi%2Fsid%3Aprimo> [accessed 26 October 2020].

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

how I write black and white characters within the Southscape, for example. There is a danger that white writers often assume the essential character is white, only signposting the ethnicity of characters who are not white. I had to consider how I used my identifications and find a solution. Morrison's 1983 short story *Recitatif*²⁵¹ provided a key. The characters' ethnicity is not described so the reader makes guesses and judgements based on their own biases. The reader plays detective deciding which is the 'black character' and then the 'white character' only to reconsider this judgement in the next paragraph. I decided not to state who was black or white but let my characters discuss the identity issues themselves.

Waker has the advantage of passing as white because of her light skin leading to white privilege; this protects her from police brutality. One of my white readers was mystified by Halo's sudden boiled up anger. However, a black reader understood where Halo was 'coming from' and why she was worried about the police being more of a threat to her because she is black. 'It's been a year [c.2015] in which police took more than three hundred black lives as protestors shut down bridges and highways across the country to remind the world that those [black] lives matter' (Older, in Ward 199)²⁵². Such high profile protests have alerted many in the white community to ugly facts that the black community had grown up knowing all along.

An ally appeared in 2020, I was well into my research. I was both discouraged and encouraged by reading Faulkner, MO Walsh and the *Southern Cultures*' interviews and needing to distance myself from Dolezal/Krug type fictions. Afia Atakora '[...] was born in

²⁵¹ Toni Morrison, 'Recitatif'. in *The Norton anthology of American literature* (eds). by Nina Baym et al. (New York: Norton, 2007).

²⁵² Daniel José Older, 'This far: notes on love and revolution'. in Jesmyn Ward (ed). *The fire this time, a new generation speaks about race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p.199.

the United Kingdom and raised in New Jersey, where she now lives. She graduated from New York University and has an MFA from Columbia University...’ (Write or die tribe)²⁵³. Her novel *Conjure Women* (2020) is set in the American South during the Reconstruction era. In an interview for the *For coloured girls’ book club* website (2020) Atakora outlines her writing and research process:

‘I aimed to shape the narrative with as many personal, first-hand accounts as I could gather. For historical references, I turned to slave narratives, Civil War diaries, planting records, and ship manifestos. The federal interviews with former slaves conducted in the 1930s by the Works Project Administration were a great resource [...] I was looking to get to the heart and soul of the material...’

Atakora also read Hurston on Hoodoo and her posthumously published book *Barracoon, the story of the last slave* (2018). Hurston interviewed 90 year old Cudjo [Kossola] Lewis in 1931, probably one of the last living enslaved Africans, a Yoruba man from Bantè, West Africa. Atakora is not a native Southerner though she did have some authenticity stemming from her West African and American heritage. She outlines her credentials via a literary family tree of kinship ties below:

‘Growing up my Ghanaian parents would tell me bedtime stories about the trickster Anansi. But I grew up in America, and as much as I loved those stories it was sometimes hard to understand the culture of a country I’d never been to. As I got older I started reading African-American folktales, like those collected and written by Virginia Hamilton. I saw the trickster Brer Rabbit, the capers of Aunt Nancy, and I thought, hey, wait, I know these [stories]. It was like meeting a distant cousin for the first time and realizing you look like identical twins. I wanted my novel to speak to the survival of these tales, to the

²⁵³ Write or die tribe, *Afia Atakora: on the unwritten stories of women throughout history, ghosts and magic and her debut novel "Conjure women"* (2020) <https://www.writeordietribe.com/author-interviews/interview-with-afia-atakora> [accessed 26 October 2020].

way they've been gifted and handed-down through so much strife and adversity, and yet came out intact' (Atakora, FCGBC).²⁵⁴.

Atakora wrote a very good novel and no one, it seems, is questioning her right to choose this subject and this region. She did offer some credibility, personal experience and a link to the material. This gave her some legitimacy and authority to her writing. She appears to be from America, West Africa and the UK. This offered me a possibility. She was a guide or trail-maker for me to follow. If she was able to write the South, perhaps I could too? *Conjure women* did not read like a Southern novel or a Southern Gothic novel, it read more like contemporary literary fiction that happened to be set in the past. This is not a criticism of her writing and well-crafted story. My point is that she did her historical research and wrote a novel about black people surviving the early years of Reconstruction in the South. However, she did not use the Southscape to craft her novel. Her novel was born of the desire to tell the important story of the '[...] things that went unsaid, too personal or too painful, and I did my best to give voice to those experiences...' (Atakora)²⁵⁵ of black people in the post-Civil War period. Her novel stems from this, not the literature of the South and the Southscape, despite the details on Hoodoo, plantations and slave quarters. However, any 'Southern beats' are a small part of her novel. It is more a psychodrama between the main characters. Atakora has boldly written a novel set in the South that comments on the South and adds to our insight, especially as she uncovered and explored first-hand accounts and gave voice to a historically marginalised group. As a

²⁵⁴ For Colored Girls Book Club, *Interview with Afia Atakora* (2020), <<https://www.forcoloredgirlsbookclub.com/interviews/interview-with-afia-atakora>> [accessed 26 October 2020].

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

fellow Brit I could follow her lead. Though, unlike Atakora I planned to go further, by co-opting the Southscape itself to assemble my novel.

18 Academic thinking on the South

From a writer's perspective one might be tempted to conclude, so far so good. However, from an academic perspective there is a problem. Recent debates about the American South have suggested that in the postmodern era the South no longer exists as a distinct entity. Essays entitled 'the globalised South' suggest that the South is now much like everywhere else, with retail malls, multinational corporations, and global cultural influences. An influx of new migrants from South East Asia and the Indian subcontinent brought their own rich cultural traditions and histories. This geographical South is often referred to as the New New South. 'The South' is a messy concept. And the concept and the place have absorbed these recent changes after a long period of apparent stasis. Maybe it is about layers. Yes there is a Starbucks filled with affluent ethnically diverse professionals, but it is still situated on a town square opposite a statue of General Robert E. Lee, or an empty plinth covered in Black Lives Matter graffiti.

As a writer who has attempted to 'learn about the South' to create my novel in a credible and authentic way, this debate trumpeting the end of the South was a worrying development. Had I invested in a mirage? Possibly I had not realised it was a mirage because I had not gone to the South to find out it was all illusion. I needed to reconsider my stockpiled 'cultural knowledge', my Southscape chronotope theories, and literary versus material reality. Was it possible to '[...] acknowledging the South as image, while discovering something authentic in [said] images' (Chadd, 227)²⁵⁶. Contemporary writers from the South have suggested this is possible and they have highlighted what makes

²⁵⁶ Clare Chadd, "It ain't Arkansas or no real place': authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah's Post-South', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016) <doi:10.1353/mss.2016.0019> [accessed 5 May 2019], p.227.

them or their work distinctly Southern, as I have already shown (in chapter 17). I also add evidence from the University of Southern Mississippi's de Grummond collection of Southern Children's Literature: a vast collection of over 160,000 published books dating from 1530 which the curator Ellen Ruffin characterises as having a Southern voice and Southern sensibility (Tribunella, 160).²⁵⁷ However, as an outsider I may be beyond such cultural validation. I had already battled Faulkner and M.O. Walsh, debunking their theory that one had to be from there (the South) to write there. But now the *there* had disappeared.

Chadd in her article "It ain't Arkansas or no real place': authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah's Post-South' (2016) offered a lifeline '[In the late twentieth century] critics such as Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon were disputing the nature of mimetic historical representation and emphasising the newly "textual" nature of reality [...]'. This suggested that there is no objective reality out there to be measured and recorded, instead our reality or realities are culturally and textually mediated. The South is still out there and a type of mirage. A mirage is real phenomenon after all. I reconsidered my reading of the South and texts from the South and set in the Southern states. I had read Berendt's *Midnight in the garden of good and evil* which coloured my perspective while wandering around Savannah, GA. We had taken a family holiday for a fortnight in Georgia and South Carolina some years before I started my PhD project. We briefly stayed down the street from The Lady Chablis' house, one of Berendt's characters and a local transgender cabaret club performer in 'real life'. She played herself in the film adaptation of the book. Chadd went even further to

²⁵⁷ Eric L. Tribunella, 'Southern Children's Literature and the de Grummond Collection: An Interview with Ellen Ruffin', *Southern Quarterly*, 54.3/4 (2017) <<https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/docview/1983632896/abstract/463B4F543B6F4CF0PQ/1?accountid=14557>> [accessed 20 August 2021], p.160.

problematize notions of place considering ‘globalised culture of shifting geographical boundaries’ (Chadd, 227).²⁵⁸ She suggested along with other academic commentators that this place is a simulated one.

‘Hillel Schwartz’s *The culture of the copy*, for example, interrogates the problems of authenticity, identity, and originality in contemporary culture of simulacra. Meanwhile, others [...] emphasis[ed] the concomitant infirmity of a foundational sense of place in a newly globalised culture of shifting geographical boundaries, a culture in which the very idea of regional authenticity was merely a simulated one’ (Chadd, 227).²⁵⁹

Simulated regional authenticity is something a writer can use. Writers are always simulating something in novels. Simulation need not mean second rate and inauthentic. This belittles the process of imaginative creation and the artistic product. This rumination on simulacra may lead us into writing postmodernist prose, whereby the traditional narrative structure and form is broken down so that the writer can draw attention to the artificial nature of the novel’s construction or its sense of place.

‘Consequently, fiction that “most freely acknowledges its fictionality” may be the “most authentic and honest” kind’ (Hutcheon, 49).²⁶⁰

This applies to Saunders *Lincoln in the bardo*. He captured the essence of the story and place using fewer words and forsaking paragraphs. The reader has no escape from the distilled essence of the events and experiences of the characters. However, I am not sure at this stage of my career I could afford postmodern experimentation. One might need to have proved oneself first as a great prose writer before one starts to cut up the text and expect one’s readers to follow. My writing of place was to take the reader to that place. I

²⁵⁸ Clare Chadd, ‘It ain’t Arkansas or no real place’: authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah’s Post-South’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016) <doi:10.1353/mss.2016.0019> [accessed 5 May 2019], p.227.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, p.227.

²⁶⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic narrative: the metafictional paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p.49.

wanted to be faithful to the field of possibility for this particular chronotope or Southscape. I wrote the novel in a traditional form because I was already taking a big risk with the content. I decided not to draw attention to the artificiality of the text and the construction or simulacrum of place, the Southscape. I wanted my readers to barely notice the Southscape rather they were to accept it as the background like a good road under a car. Although, the Southscape was a character in itself, it was also a structuring device and a gesture toward some idea of ‘the real’ to borrow from Jean Baudrillard.

[...] the distinctly Baudrillardian possibility manifests that conceptions of the real are (simply) a function of compelling aesthetic or textual practices. Here, our very idea of reality is a fictional, semantic, or linguistic one, which can only gesture toward some idea of the real but without representing it’ (Chadd, 228).²⁶¹.

I have honed my writing skills to create compelling textual practices to represent a Southern Gothic chronotopic Southscape. This Southscape gestures towards a real place mediated through other writers from the South. Although, there is a fear that I may have strayed into ‘the emergence of a phenomenon first designated “media-made Dixie” by Jack Kirby’ (Chadd, 229).²⁶². I have entered the debate territory of the ‘real South’ versus the ‘fake South’. But though cultural commentators are keen to take sides this debate is not about reality versus ersatz but more an aesthetic or an academic argument.

‘Thus, the whole question of what makes our conception of places real, our representations of them authentic, had come under radical scrutiny, even while authors [such as Hannah, for example] wrote about the region in ways that seemed compellingly authentic, nonetheless’ (Chadd, 230).²⁶³.

²⁶¹ Clare Chadd, ‘It ain’t Arkansas or no real place’: authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah’s Post-South’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016) <doi:10.1353/mss.2016.0019> [accessed 5 May 2019], p.228.

²⁶² Ibid, p.229.

²⁶³ Ibid, p.230.

Nevertheless I had to consider leading academics and Southern scholars because their insight would be useful for my writing process and this is an academic undertaking too. These sages are frequently native Southerners themselves. According to Romine in *The real South* the rapid social and economic changes since the 1950s led to a shift in how the South is and how it is seen, ‘as a social reality and as an aesthetic subject’. According to Romine the South is a cultural reproduction ‘achieved through the power of text’ (Chadd, 230).²⁶⁴ Romaine is an ally suggesting the South is made and made again through writing. As a writer I used this perspective to craft my novel while documenting some of the contemporary social reality I saw from my reading and the news.

Although, Bone in the preface to his book *The postsouthern sense of place in contemporary fiction* (2005) states ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged among Southern literary scholars that “the South” and “Southern literature” have been characterised by a “sense of place”’ (Bone, vii).²⁶⁵; in the late capitalist South, or post-South seeing, treating or conceptualising the South as a distinct region becomes problematic for writers.

‘[...] the idea of “placing” such writing in the South, of fixing the region-as-referent in a verifiably Southern lexicon, becomes fundamentally problematic’ (Bone, 45).²⁶⁶.

Was I merely engaged in nostalgia or a Dixification project? This concern regarding authenticity asked if it was possible to produce a good novel with some artistic merit. Was my novel going to be something one might find in *The mammoth book of Southern*

²⁶⁴ Ibid, p.230.

²⁶⁵ Martyn Bone, *The postsouthern sense of place in contemporary fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p.vii.

²⁶⁶Ibid, p.45.

Gothic romance (2014) a collection of Southern-fried short stories. I had to research around these issues in order to find a way forward.

Chadd sites Ayers in the aptly named *All over the map: rethinking American regions* (1996) “[...] that ““From its very beginning, people have believed that the South, defined against an earlier South that was somehow more authentic, real, more unified and distinct, was not only disappearing but also declining”” (Chadd, 231).²⁶⁷. Thus, the ‘authentic South’ was actually a nostalgic construct rather than something physically real, that those living within it could legitimately claim ownership of and therefore sole right to. Michael Kreyling developed this argument.

‘Michael Kreyling argues similarly that a critical paradigm of a South that has become historically “post”—in which “authenticity” and “reality” emerge as central concepts, at least insofar as they are problematic ones—does not completely deconstruct the past and meaning but rather “interrogate[s] the systems by which those entities have been [traditionally] known’ (Chadd, 241).²⁶⁸.

Indeed Kreyling states ‘To put quotation marks around the real is not to efface the real; rather, it is to put it into a condition of multiple codes rather than the traditional realistic mimetic system of the one and only’ (Kreyling, 155).²⁶⁹. It is useful to reconsider my writing the South and free it of mimetic pressures. It is not a documentary or reportage. What is ‘real’ is a relative or subjective term.

Key Southern scholars such as Bone, Fred Hobson, Alex Knoenagel and Matthew Guinn have all argued that Southern writers (and I am including those of us who write about the South) all have to fight a battle with our antecedents.

²⁶⁷ Clare Chadd, “It ain’t Arkansas or no real place’: authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah’s Post-South’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016) <doi:10.1353/mss.2016.0019> [accessed 5 May 2019], p.231.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, p.241.

²⁶⁹ Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern literature* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), p.155.

‘Bone argues that in Hobson’s formulation of influence, literary “latecomers” have forever fought futile oedipal battles to overcome their poetic antecedents. Alex Knoenagel stresses similarly that contemporary Southern writers must “write in conscious relationship to tradition”, a tradition that Guinn argues “menaces, rather than informs”. Perhaps it is unsurprising that anxieties should accompany one’s entry into a tradition which was not only overpopulated with the influence of others, but which also radically questioned its contemporary participants’ capacities to be believable, original, or to “say it” right”’ (Chadd, 243)²⁷⁰.

Again this important for my project because I used Southern literature for my novel’s antecedents rather than my experience of living, or growing up, in the South. I did not have that. I learned about the South and the Southscape from these antecedents. They provided me with a structure, cultural knowledge and tools to create my novel. By drawing on the tradition my work is in constant dialogue with it. I chose to have black and white characters but to not highlight this specifically, trying to avoid the white bias that the essential protagonist is white and needs no colour descriptor. And one doesn’t want to define a character merely by their ethnicity. I chose not to make the poor characters ‘white trash’ villains, but custodians of the wild. There are ‘racial undercurrents’, because the Southscape is haunted by Jim Crow practices that are not ‘safely’ in the past. I am always trying to ‘say it right’. Of course I was intimidated by the likes of Faulkner, Tartt and Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). My goal can be elegantly summed up by Chadd below. It will be for my readers to decide if I have something to contribute.

“By creating a contemporary Gothic yarn that more than stands up to its literary inheritance—one to which we are still compelled to listen, despite the likelihood of our having heard it all before—the Southern storytelling tradition is reinvigorated and renewed” (Chadd, 244)²⁷¹.

²⁷⁰ Clare Chadd, “It ain’t Arkansas or no real place’: authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah’s Post-South’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016) <doi:10.1353/mss.2016.0019> [accessed 5 May 2019], p.243.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.244.

I return again to Romine's quote from his introduction to his book entitled *The real South, Southern narrative in the age of cultural reproduction* (2014) as relevant and supportive of my position. Romine states that 'The real South is a study of the fake South, which I [Romine] argue becomes the real South through the intervention of narrative' (Romine, 9)²⁷². My narrative is valid after all because it is based on study of the (fake) South. My novel shows readers a real South that does not have to be a South for all. Chadd concludes with: '[...] a willingness to confess the very fictitiousness of one's own textual practices, earns the story teller a paradoxical claim to authenticity' (Chadd, 249)²⁷³. Thus my thesis is a confession, my story is based on my research and reading the South. It is authentic. I have put in the time and earned my place.

'As Chris Walsh points out in his chapter on critical reception, the boundaries of *Beloved* (1987) figure into the problem of what constitutes Southern Literature; much of [*Beloved* for example] occurs in Ohio, yet the traumatic events haunting it crossed over the Ohio River. That line of demarcation (actually the line of the Missouri Compromise, and therefore the real line between slave and free states, rather than the popularly remembered Mason-Dixon) suggests the fuzziness even of the North-South border' (Walsh in Ellis, ix)²⁷⁴.

Chris Walsh sums up the issue of borders and boundaries, about what is Southern and what is not. Such things are not as cut and dried as they may have previously appeared. *Beloved* is often considered part of the Southern canon because of its subject matter despite its location and the fact that Morrison is a native Ohioan. Morrison's work

²⁷² Scott Romine, *The real South: Southern narrative in the age of cultural reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), p.9.

²⁷³ Clare Chadd, 'It ain't Arkansas or no real place': authenticity and textuality in Barry Hannah's Post-South', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 69.2 (2016) <doi:10.1353/mss.2016.0019> [accessed 5 May 2019], p.249.

²⁷⁴ Chris Walsh in Jay Ellis, 'On Southern Gothic literature, introduction'. in *Southern Gothic literature* (ed). by Jay Ellis (Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013), p.ix.

continues to provide insight and a damning indictment to racialized inequality across American in time and space.

19 Postscript Black Lives Matter and cancelling the Confederacy

In the South today protesters are pulling down statues. The likes of Confederate General Robert E. Lee are being ‘cancelled’ to use a current cultural phrase for the overthrow of those who had previously been put on pedestals by some powerful or overly deferential citizens in the past trying to build a ‘Lost Cause’ mythology. University of Southern Mississippi academic Kate Cochran explains why such statues should be taken down and counteracts the reactionary misnomer ‘heritage not hate’ backlash.

‘[...] Proposing the removal of Confederate statues—many funded by groups like the Daughters of the Confederacy and erected as the Confederate officers were dying out in the late 1890s—no more “sanitizes” history than does removing segregated public facilities. Are schoolchildren any less aware of Jim Crow laws without being faced with that debasing visual reminder every day?’ (Cochran).²⁷⁵.

I needed a place to stand on this issue. I became a Southernist scholar alongside a Southern Gothic academic and a more skilled writer because of the PhD process. However, seeing the statues come down on the news gave me mixed feelings. Yes, it was about time monuments to states’ rights to *keep slavery* got taken down. However, I did not know whether the South I had researched and written about was about to disappear again.

This is an interesting time with several competing narratives. There were the old school racists who would gladly see Jim Crow reinstated; sentimental and ahistorical worshipers of the ‘Lost Cause’ emblems, ‘heritage not hate’ states’ rights activists (who have only digested half that sentence) and Black Lives Matter protesters who have based

²⁷⁵ Kate Cochran, *Thoughts on Confederate monuments* (Society for the Study of Southern Literature Facebook page, 15 August 2017) <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/333214576739807/?ref=bookmarks>> [accessed 17 August 2017].

their activism on considerable evidence of police brutality towards the black community.

Cochran explains that:

‘[...] The message Confederate monuments send is “Black Lives Don’t Matter,” so it is no surprise that other memorials, like the ones dedicated to Emmett Till, are regularly defaced’ (Cochran)²⁷⁶.

Thus, the South was changing again through the actions of often young protestors who had had enough of the slow pace of supposed change and inequality. However, these elements were always present in the South. When 44th President Obama was campaigning for the Democratic nomination in 2007 he explained that (after talking with black Civil Rights leaders) his desire to be president ‘[...] wasn’t just an exercise in vanity or ambition but rather part of an unbroken chain of progress’ (Obama, 122)²⁷⁷. He attended the commemoration march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in 2007, stating ‘I’d long wanted to make the pilgrimage to the site of Bloody Sunday, which in 1965 became a crucible of the battle for Civil Rights, when Americans fully realised what was at stake’ (Obama, 122)²⁷⁸. He goes on to talk of campaigning in South Carolina and being ‘[...] met with warmth and hospitality from blacks and whites alike. In cities like Charleston, I experienced the much-touted New South-cosmopolitan, diverse, and bustling with commerce’ (Obama, 126)²⁷⁹. However, as he travelled through South Carolina, he makes the point that ‘[...] racial attitudes seemed less coded, blunter—sometimes not hidden at all’ (Obama, 126)²⁸⁰. Although, there had been change and progress wins due to the Civil Rights’ movement, there is still a residue or trace of the old unreconstructed South. The

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Barack Obama, *A promised land* (UK: Viking, 2020), p.122.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, p.122.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, p.126.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, p.126.

South, the New South and the New New South all exist at the same time in my view because this will depend on who you listen to and read in the contemporary South today. As a writer I tried capture these layers. My protagonist Waker notices an empty plinth as she leaves Savannah airport. My intention was to indicate the past, the present and possibly a future.

A last word from Randall's novel challenging the romance of the antebellum *Gone with the wind*-style Southern history and literature.

'Hope of visiting Jeems makes me nostalgic for spacious, high-ceilinged rooms and lavish plaster embellishments. The outer doors, the front doors of Tata were six feet wide. When they were open, it was as if the side of the house had been taken down. We will take back this place, we will take back this place, a tree once grew where this dining room stands and will grow there again; we will take back this place, nature says as you move through the house; and it was Garlic who created the structure that said it' (Randall, 155).²⁸¹.

This extract starts with old school nostalgia, experienced by a former enslaved woman Cynara looking back on her past. But the paragraph goes on to change the tone and intentions. The repetition of 'We will take back this place' makes the statement powerful, 'we will take back this place'. And below, from earlier in the novel, to remind us that however gracious plantation houses and heritage tourist trails appear, the reality was very different. Men, women and children were owned and turned into things. Garlic, the enterprising enslaved butler, gains control of the house he has built and protects the black lives within, both of those who were dead and those still living. It serves as a monument to enslaved people.

'It's an old confusion, people turning into things. When folks is gone (sold, dead, run-off), you got a corn husk doll, a walnut-shell ring, fingertips of dirt on the hem of a dress. It happened so much, maybe now things turn into people.

²⁸¹ Alice Randall, *The wind done gone* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), p.155.

The house, Tata—Garlic could hear it speak. All it contained of brown lives it had eaten; it was a living thing. Garlic walks into the great hall of the house like R. pushes in between my thighs; his eyes scream, “Sugar walls, sugar walls.” Everything sweats in the heat. Garlic won’t permit anything that might provoke Other to sell the place. Won’t put Cotton Farm at risk at all. It’s his sacred place’ (Randall, 86).²⁸².

²⁸² Ibid, p.86.

20 Conclusion

My conclusion is that writers should have ‘access all areas’ providing they do their work in good faith. This means diligent research to support a great story that will engender insights for readers. I initially used Bakhtin’s chronotope theory as a theoretical framework in which to study the novel. While deconstructing Southern and Southern Gothic novels I found that not only was the landscape highly significant to these genres it could better be conceptualised as a Southscape. The Southscape contained all the elements of a Gothic house. Bakhtin’s chronotope became a writing tool whereby I was able to apply specific practices to improve my creative skill. And I had key tropes such as hauntedness and labyrinthine extensiveness to include or augment in my novel.

My thesis and novel sit at an interstice between Gothic, Southern Gothic, literary and Southernist scholarship and creative practice-based academic research. There are many overlaps and undertows. During my six year part-time PhD journey my faculty of Social Sciences morphed into the Kingston School of Art this shifted my thinking. I began to realise my novel scrapbook collage and instinctive intuitive approach was actually a valuable academic research methodology; a method which I could use for future novel writing and for teaching other students. Being part of KSA gave me permission to be more creative.

It may seem churlish to list the limitations of previous academics’ work as I have been standing on their shoulders. However, most of what I have read in the field of Southernist studies tends to be by Southerners and often for other Southerners, with the notable exception of Martyn Bone a native of Truro, Cornwall. There is clearly a benefit in widening

the field of contributors. Outsiders do not have to unlearn prevailing paradigms. We can stand outside unconscious or conscious autochthonic biases to be more objective.

As to deficiencies in my work I have yet to read my way through Southern children's literature. I realised I was writing a young adult novel, fairly late in my writing process. The de Grummond collection at the University of Southern Mississippi would have provided excellent insights. At de Grummond I would have been able to explore Northern American writers who wrote Southern children's literature such as Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867-1905) series and Annie Fellows Johnson's *Little Colonel* (1895-1908) series. Mary White Ovington's *Hazel* (1913) about a Boston child sent to Alabama to regain her health (currently out of print) has parallels with my plot. And Margaret McMullan who used family Civil War diaries to write *How I found Strong: a story of the Civil War* in 2004 (Tribunella, p.151).²⁸³.

Had I been able to travel to spend a term at the University of Southern Mississippi (Ole Miss) or an HBCU and attend American based conferences I may have discovered something missing from my novel and thinking that you only get when you go there. I have had rigorous feedback that I have applied. However, I have not had an American reader to check for Britishisms. According to James Ledbetter when British crime writer P.D. Viner had eight Americans read his New York set novel manuscript *The funeral director* each reader spotted a different 'British error'. Ledbetter also mentions Lionel Shriver who

²⁸³ Eric L. Tribunella, 'Southern Children's Literature and the de Grummond Collection: An Interview with Ellen Ruffin', *Southern Quarterly*, 54.3/4 (2017) <<https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.kingston.ac.uk/docview/1983632896/abstract/463B4F543B6F4CF0PQ/1?accountid=14557>> [accessed 20 August 2021], p.151.

appears to have got in a mess confusing both British and American dialogue over the years (Ledbetter)²⁸⁴.

I would like to research more on Daylight Gothic. I discovered a tantalising footnote on Shorer's Introduction to Truman Capote, *Selected writings* (New York: Random House, 1963) in Zacharias (Zacharias, 343)²⁸⁵. The book is out of print and not digitised. And due to COVID-19 Kingston University library shut down their interlibrary loans. And the British Library had shut. Although, I did use the concept as a spring board and set my story events in broad daylight instead of at night. *

I used Chadd's elegant summaries on where academics are on the issue of whether the South still exists. From my extensive reading I can identify a Southern voice and sensibility that is manifest in Southern literature and Southern Gothic in particular. Place is a character and this can be related back to the material geography below the Mason-Dixon Line. Southern Gothic is a distinct genre using the macabre and the grotesque, not as horror tropes, but to illustrate the human condition, which was my aim.

My contribution is a rebuttal to the autochthonic view that it is only possible to write a good Southern [Gothic] novel if you are a native Southerner. My novel became a test of my research and theories too. I have synthesised Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, Southern scholarship and creative writing practices through collage and intuition providing a methodology that other writers may use to augment their own creative skills. I too will apply this approach in the process of writing my third novel.

²⁸⁴ The New Yorker, *When British authors write American dialogue, or try to* by James Ledbetter (2017), <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/when-british-authors-write-american-dialogue-or-try-to>> [accessed 3 July 2021].

²⁸⁵ Lee Zacharias, 'Living the American dream: 'Children on their Birthdays'', *Lee Studies in Short Fiction*, 12.4 (1975) <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1297935519?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo> [accessed 19 August 2018], p.343.

*Addendum

There are some interesting gaps in my thesis that further research could fill. Reading Gina Caison's *Red States* I discovered that Native Americans (Chickasaw, Cherokee, Choctaw, Lumbee, Creek and Osage to name but a few nations) in the South conceptualised time as a spiral. It would be germane to plot my thesis into a spiral collage and see what insights or blind spots emerge (Caison).²⁸⁶ Perhaps one major blind spot is to be reminded of the white Southern settler colonialist (unconscious?) perspective that they were the first peoples and true owners of the south. And recent work by Andrea Pase and others, in 2021, on pandemic cartographies add an interesting dimension to studies of place and the use of maps during Covid 19 (Pase).²⁸⁷

There is recent scholarship on things/inanimate objects and non-human animals as a way of displacing our human world view. New materialist theorists Giorgio Agamben, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway (Rivkin)²⁸⁸ are developing a new post-humanist understanding, destabilizing the boundary between humans, non-human animals and nature. This can be connected with eco-criticism and Eco-Gothic. My novel *Three kids and a dead dog* does have room for these new perspectives to be further explored.

Disability studies are gaining momentum in the academy and there is ample scope to review Southern Gothic 'misfits' through this lens and as a disabled person I could combine this with my own personal experience. And within disability and neurodiversity studies is

²⁸⁶ Gina Caison, *Red states indigeneity, settler colonialism, and Southern studies* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2020).

²⁸⁷ Andrea Pase and others, 'Pandemic cartographies: a conversation on mappings, imaginings and emotions', *Mobilities*, 16.1 (2021) <doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2020.1866319> [accessed 28 December 2021].

²⁸⁸ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds). *Literary theory: an anthology* 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

the work of Dr Kai Syng Tan: academic, artist, curator at Manchester Metropolitan University, who uses tapestry for academic projects in a similar way to my intuitive collage methodology for productive antagonisms, messy entanglements, disrupting of dominant narratives, contextualisation, neuro-divergence, crossing boundaries, challenging the status quo, palimpsests, simulacrum, and fluidity (Tan)²⁸⁹ . Messy entanglements indeed...

²⁸⁹ Kai Syng Tan, 'Art and psychiatry in the 21st century: here's to more messy – magical – entanglements', *BJPsych Bulletin* (2021) doi:10.1192/bjb.2021.93 [accessed 1 January 2022].

Appendix on collage

A brief illustration of how a collage method evolves. Sara Collins wrote an eloquent review on Eddie S Glaude Jr's book 'Begin again: James Baldwin's America and its urgent lessons for today' (2021).

'He resolved to engage deeply with Baldwin's work, to try to think "with" him, in order to interrogate "how an insidious view of race, in the form of Trumpism, continues to frustrate any effort to 'achieve our country'", and then to write about it. The result is *Begin Again*, a book that is perfect for Baldwin aficionados or anyone experiencing staggering disbelief at America's state of disarray and trying to make sense of it. What sets this account apart is that Glaude understands how Baldwin's writing becomes a pathway for one's own thoughts; he's able to synthesise the novelist's work in a way that transcends summation or homage and becomes instead an act of breath-taking literary assimilation that acquires its own generative power' (Collins, 16).²⁹⁰.

This was a gift for my collage technique and my punk-do-it-yourself-sensibility.

Becomes a great conclusion summing up what I was trying to achieve.

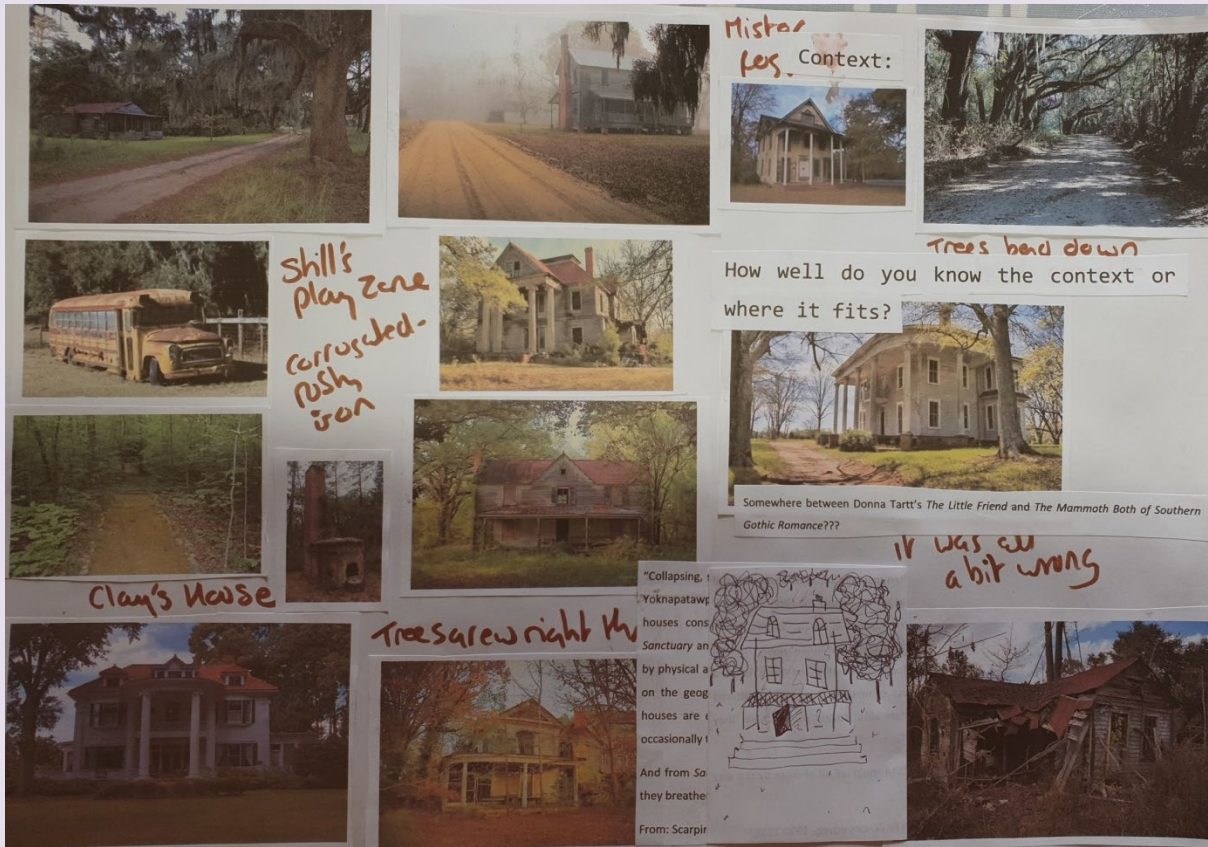
I resolved to engage deeply with any Southern work, to try to think "with" it, in order to interrogate and then to write about it. The result is my thesis and

²⁹⁰ Sara Collins, 'The writings of James Baldwin spark a timely and absorbing engagement with US history', *The Guardian Saturday review*, Feb.20 2021, p.16.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.16.

my novel, trying to make sense of it. What sets this account apart is that my writing becomes a pathway for my own thoughts; trying to synthesise my process in a way that transcends summation or homage and becomes instead an act or literary assimilation that has acquired its own generative power.







'It comes back to you, your punk attitude when you need it' 2019 (Albertine, 49).²⁹²

²⁹² Viv Albertine, *To throw away unopened* (London: Faber and Faber, 2019), p.49.

Appendix on MHRA referencing

MHRA Style of referencing – Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Please note before you read this help sheet:

MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) is the style required in the English Literature, Creative Writing and History Fields at Kingston University. Other Fields require you to use a different referencing system such as Harvard. Always ask if you are unsure which is the required style in your module.

Students using the MHRA style are required to produce either Endnotes (History), or Footnotes (English Literature & Creative Writing) and a Bibliography for each of your assignments. Each reference should contain all the publication details required to trace an item.

Glossary:

Bibliography: A bibliography should contain full details of all the reading which you have done in preparation for the piece of work, and not just those sources which you have been cited within your essay.

Citing: Acknowledging the contribution of a specific individual or organisation as a source of a particular statement, view, argument or decision.

Endnotes: a reference list at the end of your essay/chapter detailing just the sources which you have cited.

Footnote: full details of a source cited in your essay and found at the bottom of the relevant page of your essay.

Referencing: Ensuring that what has been cited can be identified precisely, by providing full details of the book/article/website in a foot/endnote.

Why should I do this?

You cite and reference your work in order to avoid the charge of plagiarism, which means using the work of others without acknowledging your source of information or inspiration. Plagiarism is treated very seriously, and plagiarised work is normally disqualified.

About this guide

This guide is based on:

Pears, R & Shields, G. *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide*. Revised ed. (Durham: Pear Tree Books, 2008). [Study skills 808.027 PEA].

Multiple copies of this publication are available for you to borrow and/or refer to in the University library. An electronic version is also available from StudentSpace or the library catalogue.

How to cite specific sources using the MHRA style

1. Books

• Book by a single author:

Author's name, *Title of book in italics*. Edition if it is not the 1st edition. (Place of publication: publisher, date of publication in round brackets).

Example:

Footnote/endnote:

Brycchan Carey, *British abolitionism and the rhetoric of sensibility : writing, sentiment and slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.35-40.

Bibliography:

Carey, Brycchan, *British abolitionism and the rhetoric of sensibility : writing, sentiment and slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

• Book by two authors:

Authors' names, *Title of book in italics*, Edition if it is not the 1st edition (Place of publication: publisher, date of publication in round brackets).

Example:

Footnote/endnote:

Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), Chapter 3.

Bibliography:

Byrne, Eleanor and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999)

no comma

• Book by three authors:

Authors' names, *Title of book in italics*, Edition if it is not the 1st edition (Place of publication: publisher, date of publication in round brackets).

Example:

Footnote/endnote:

Andrea Mammone, S. Dechezelles and L. Guerrieri, *Italian neo-fascism from 1943 to the present day* (London:Routledge, 2010), p. 21.

Bibliography:

Mammone, Andrea, S. Dechezelles and L. Guerrieri, *Italian neo-fascism from 1943 to the present day* (London:Routledge, 2010)

2. Journal articles

• Article in a printed journal:

Author's name(s), 'Title of article in single quotation marks', *Title of journal in italics*, volume number. issue number, (year of publication in round brackets), page numbers.

Example:

Footnote/endnote:

John Stuart, 'Scottish missionaries and the end of empire: the case of Nyasaland', *Historical Research*, 76.193 (2003), 411-430, (p. 421).

Bibliography:

Stuart, John 'Scottish missionaries and the end of empire: the case of Nyasaland', *Historical Research*, 76.193 (2003), 411-430

• Article in an electronic journal:

Author's name 'Title of article in single quotation marks', *Title of journal in italics*, volume number. issue number (year of publication in round brackets <Stable (persistent) URL or DOI number> [accessed date in square brackets].

Note: URLs of journal web pages change frequently. For this reason most online journal publishers list either a stable (persistent) URL for each article e.g. JSTOR, or a doi number. These can be cut and pasted into your reference, as in the examples below, and will enable others to locate an article quickly and reliably.

Examples:

Footnote/endnote:

Marisa Linton, 'The unvirtuous king?: clerical rhetoric on the French monarchy, 1760-1774', *History of European Ideas*, 25.1-2 (1999) <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0191-6599\(99\)00020-0](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0191-6599(99)00020-0)> [accessed 21 July 2010].

Bibliography:

Linton, Marisa, 'The unvirtuous king?: clerical rhetoric on the French monarchy, 1760-1774', *History of European Ideas*, 25.1-2 (1999) <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0191-6599\(99\)00020-0](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0191-6599(99)00020-0)> [accessed 21 July 2010]

Beck, Peter J. 'The Anglo-Persian oil dispute 1932-33', *Journal of contemporary history*, 9.4 (1974) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/260294>> [accessed 21 July 2010]

3. Newspapers

• Article in a printed newspaper:

Author's name, 'Title of article in single quotation marks', *Title of newspaper in italics*, day and month and year, page number (prefixed by pp.).

!!!

lower case unless start of title + any proper nouns

Also use ' ' not italics

First name first.

For book names in title

just full stop no comma

add comma see over

²⁹³ Kingston University Information Services, *MHRA style of referencing, faculty of Arts and Social Sciences* (2015), <<https://www.kingston.ac.uk/library-and-learning-services/>> [accessed 1 November 2015].

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* Note: my bibliography follows closely the Kingston University Information Services MHRA style of referencing for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 2015, when I started my PhD project, based on Pears and Shields, *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide*. Revised ed. (Durham: Pear Tree Books, 2008). I have endeavoured to be as accurate and as true to this system which involves the proper English usage of not capitalising every word in a book title, for example. Recent MHRA advice has changed. However, I have continued with the method and style that was appropriate when I started my PhD project and for most of its research lifetime.

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