

PREFACE

A Twenty-first Century Gothic

O my Goth!

—*Graffiti on the streets of London*

WHAT'S HAPPENING to the Gothic in the twenty-first century? Though seemingly lost in the castle of 1980s and 1990s horror, endungeoned-by-association with overproduced and merely nauseating splatter, the Gothic has tunnelled its way out. Now the neo-Gothic, working more by implication than evisceration, casts its shadow upon TV, films, and games; *Manga* and graphic novels; music and Broadway shows. Like a modern version of Keats's pale Knight 'alone and palely loitering', we are waiting for another encounter with the haunting, cryptic, and ethereal. The Gothic hath us in thrall. *New York Times* media correspondent Alessandra Stanley tries, unconvincingly, to calm herself:

There must be a rational explanation for all the supernatural phenomena. . . . There must. Because it is weird, and even a little freaky, that so many shows . . . prey on the paranormal. Vampires have day jobs as detectives, store clerks reap souls for the Devil, reporters time-travel to get their stories straight, cheerleaders walk through fire, and people of all kinds talk to [the] dead . . . sometimes quite chattily. . . . Who or what is out there? And is it (2007)

It's easy to remember the few wraithlike Goth figures wandering around my college campus twenty-one years ago. Flash forward now and those shades seem mainstream. The Gothic subculture has dedicated festivals, featuring bands like *Dead by Dawn* and *Ghost Orgy*, and its own romance sites. GothScene.com exists to match 'gothic singles together in a totally free atmosphere', and a Google check shows 916,000 more related dating entries. Almost clean parlours for Gothic moms to get their conspicuous skull and bleeding rose tattoos have burgeoned (how was it that tattoos in the nineteenth century were always something to hide and then

reveal in secret to a lover?). Full assimilation of Gothika has been realised. Martha Stewart, sadly, was too late showcasing tips to perk up the modern Goth love shack. The quintessential dark-living book, *Paint it Black: A Guide to Gothic Homemaking*, by a Cubano metal rocker named Voltaire, is already on the shelves of Borders and Chapters.

No longer the ghost that we can't see, the pop-culture Gothic broods and plays dress-up all about us, yet the essence of the literary Gothic still shocks. In such lurid literature, the mind has mountains: characters, whose skin we wear as we read, edge towards the cliff of life-changing transgression, and fall. A taboo is violated—that eternal deal struck with one devil or another—and there is no climbing back. The Gothic in these twenty-four all-new stories is a high-altitude realm of frightful possibilities. They are about more than wearing heavy mascara, black leather thigh-high kinky boots with six inch heels, and an exquisite pout; quite beyond the shiny pattern of polished silver nipple shields, fuzzy handcuffs, torn fishnets, and velvet chokers the colour of midnight. Though all those trappings take their scintillating place some nights, these previously unseen stories you cradle aren't into Halloween show. Opening a closet of black corsets in real-life is nothing compared to our inner eye witnessing one of these new figures bury or burn in vain the record of a grisly crime. Their abuses of power in every way will all be undressed. And isn't that the dread—that *all* will know? This sequel anthology of neo-Gothic tales suddenly reveals more than any fetish ball ever could. More than that, these never-seen accounts take off where their precursors from 1764–1840 left off.

Channelling Walpole, Lewis, Shelley, and Mrs Radcliffe, our best contemporary Gothicists still obsess over what is unforgivable (when a character masks as a God, and takes a life) and over what is unbelievable. The magic Gothic frame remains, or what Jennifer Egan (*The Keep*, 2007) succinctly described after her recent reading in Houston: vulnerable strangers come to a new place; stay around long enough to seem participants in their own victimization; compromise themselves; face the uncanny; and then leave us wondering whether it was really the paranormal or just their brains on broil. The danger and the difference are that *Exotic Gothic 2* roams the farther shores as it disturbs in unforeseen ways. It entangles us in ambiguities and gasping endings, all the while letting the impossible seep into the possible *so far from home*. Think of these writers as Gothic cartographers: there are still many blank spaces on our internal maps of terror; these artists intend to fill them. It is a dark gifting to you, like the maps of the Middle Ages with their griffins, hippogriffs, and freakish people. But this map is personal, telepathic; it divines our fears. It only helps us *lose* our way in the strange regions of gloom and miscreation, where everything looms close which before was only half lit, half formed, half known. Enter here and contend with Ghosts, Vampires, Zombies, *Kappa*, Werewolves, Living Sculptures,

Demons, Madwomen, Shape-shifters, *Doppelgängers*, Time Travellers, Nature Spirits, Aliens, Dragons, Beasts from the Depths, and Dingoes from the Dreamtime. More hideous is the modern twist—though there may be only one sensational creature afoot in the tale, the villainy is more diffused than any time in Gothic history. There are so many agents of wickedness in each story. ‘Will the real Monster please step forward?’ becomes a fair question.

A question more dire is how love acts in our new Gothic world. Lovers’ hearts are still held ‘in a castle dark or a fortress strong’, as Gordon Lightfoot’s wounding song put it, but it is just that the building material has changed. In *Exotic Gothic 2*, the castle keeps are erected with the stones of our own paranoia, mortared with our own self-disgust, inspired by the killing jealousy of real life. It is a ghoulish fact that seeds for much of the fiction herein were headlines. The drawbridge between journalism and Gothicism is securely down. No doubt within a year there will come a Gothic writer moved and brave enough to fictionalize the sadness that happened recently in my city, perhaps compelled as Joyce Carol Oates was to write ‘Landfill’ in 2006 for *The New Yorker*. Last year, at an apartment adjacent to where I once lived, flames blazed from a second floor balcony. For two days and nights an acrid black cloud billowed. One neighbour complained, ‘The smell was awful. What is he burning? Not cooking, but burning. There *is* a difference.’ What firefighters and detectives eventually discovered beggared belief. The resident of smoky Apt. #224 said first, rather symbolically, that he ‘was cooking for a wedding’. Then he confessed. Angry that his nineteen year old girlfriend fell in love while off at university, he strangled, butchered, and grilled her on his two patio barbecues. Said the Sheriff of my County in quietest voice, ‘As a result of this, there are no remaining body parts. . . . There will be no search’ (‘Sheriff: Suspect Dismembered, Grilled Aggie’s Remains,’ *Associated Press*, 25 March 2007). My *Horror, Ghost, & Gothic Fiction* students were the first to share the monstrous news with me. We were heartbroken to know a macabre plot thought confined to Lord Dunsany’s ‘The Two Bottles of Relish’, which we had just read, could actually occur to one of ours. It happened to a promising young woman with an engineering scholarship, who as a little girl strode into school with hope, just across the street from where my class was meeting. Whether life is imitating art in such a tragedy, or art life, the more disquieting question remains: who will protect us from those who say they love us most? The fictional Gothic, as well as the true crime Gothic of Apt. #224, lives to rule another human heart. *That heart will obey*, love intensely, banish doubt, never stray, and satisfy every fantasy, *or it will be taken out*. Killing what we love is one half of the Gothic business, as Oscar Wilde and Robert Browning knew. Listen to the narrator long enough, and surely the small ghost of someone just slain will sit beside you. But the other half of this darkness, as Mary Shelley dreamt, is reanimation.

There will be some ungodly attempts at resurrection in these extraordinary accounts, as authors usher you to seven continents where the blood cries out. Now it is for you to fly, and for death to pursue: to Asia (the Philippines, Japan, China,

Cambodia, Turkey, and North Korea), then Africa (Zimbabwe and Zanzibar), Europe (Norway, Russia, Poland, Spain, Greece, Iceland, and Bosnia & Herzegovina), North America (the U.S.A. and Canada), South America (Bolivia), Australia, and last, Antarctica. Frozen beneath the twisted Gothic love affairs in these lands are cold geopolitics—some political thrills with your supernatural chills. The close presence of old invaders and new foes bind this book together with the holding power of a stalker's stare. Tensing between the covers are America & North Korea, Japan & the Philippines, China & Cambodia, Spain & Bolivia, Turkey & Greece, and Russia & Poland.

For you, our neo-Gothic expeditionary, comes a journey treacherous as any tomb-raider's. Expect danger, hoodooed treasure, cryptic and demonic lovers, and the most unblest deaths. It *is* bad out there. Characters are punched, poked, stabbed, fatally fevered, nearly drowned, deserted, dropped, crevassed, bombed, exterminated, devoured, hanged, shot, and stoned. And it's not just the people behaving horribly. All creatures great and small misbehave in the fiction of marvels from Nancy A. Collins, Peter Bell, Taylor Kincaid, John Bushore, Kenneth McKenney, and George Makana Clark. Wolves run the streets of Moscow, tormenting ravens fly through Oslo, runaway horses trample in Iceland, and cephalopods with attitude emerge off the coasts of Virginia and Spain. And out of the Unspeakable River dividing Zambia and Zimbabwe splashes a crash of stampeding hippopotami.

And what horror is there that scuttles hippos?

Beasts from legends familiar and exotic rise in whirling tales by Edward P. Crandall, Steve Duffy, and Adam Golaski. Folklore, myth and living religion assume flesh and blood in astonishing tales from Stephen Dedman, Robert Hood, Elizabeth Massie, Reggie Oliver, Milorad Pavić, and Barbara Roden. The many shades of our most subtle terrors redden the revolutionary marriage of Magic Realism to Gothicism in Dean Francis Alfar's and Tia V. Travis's elegant contributions. The strongest locks of all—*our own mind-forged manacles*—imprison narrators in the unforgettable work of Terry Dowling, Genni Gunn, Nicholas Royle, and John Whitbourn. And the enigma of Time, of where the past goes, and of the palimpsest of one era upon another, unfolds in commanding tales by Christopher Fowler, Steve Rasnic Tem, and David Wellington. The effects of evil linger for a long time, as we discover from these artists, longer than we can ever know.

All this, you may judge for yourself, as the new Gothic presence. Not painted crimson on mere lips and cheeks, but all over. She is ready for the new dusk. All the body rouged for you. Your wait is over. She's just across an alley of skeletons, and inside a villa of mysteries. You will come into her chamber of latest tales no virgin, yet the seduction will be a surprise; the embrace a little ferocious, sealed with a curse, and stained with a kiss.

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