



The Haunting: Deleted Scenes

Poems i.m. Shirley Jackson

By Kevin Patrick McCann

The Haunting: Deleted Scenes

Poems i.m. Shirley Jackson
and Joan McCann (nee Salter)
1930-2020

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With an Introduction by Fran Lock

Never explain—your reader is as smart as you

—Basil Bunting

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Introduction

By Fran Lock

‘insecure, uncontrolled, i wrote of neuroses and fear and i think all my books laid end to end would be one long documentation of anxiety...’

—Shirley Jackson

Shirley Jackson’s 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* is now widely acknowledged to be a classic example of the literary ghost story; it has often been described as an important successor to the Gothic horror genre established through haunted house novels such as Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*. Fair enough, but *The Haunting of Hill House* exists in a far from easy relationship with these prior works. Jackson dredges up the residues of the Gothic horror genre, follows its formulas, deploys its tropes, but only to upend and subvert them. For all its excessive, darkly carnal grotesquery, the Gothic novel takes place within a tightly contained fictional universe. It offers us a ‘romance’; it is, by its very definition, fantastical and escapist. The plot of the Gothic novel is resolved, its evils vanquished in line with the normalising aspirations of the dominant culture. The Gothic novel is a kind of literary safety valve: it allows for the imaginative exploration of dark and disturbing themes within the confines of a world so different from our own that we needn’t trouble ourselves with its ominous implications. Not so Jackson’s tale.

Properly speaking, *The Haunting of Hill House* is not a ‘horror’ story at all, but a terror story: horror is our visceral shock and revulsion at the sight or sound of the frightening thing. Terror is our dread at the possibility of the frightening thing, a thing unnamed, amorphous, abstract, other.

The premise for the story is simple enough: parapsychologist, Doctor John Montague, invites a group of individuals, carefully selected for their psychic sensitivity, to spend part of the summer at Hill House—a manor house with a violent history and a reputation for being haunted. The only two people to accept Doctor’s Montague’s invitation are Eleanor Vance, a deeply lonely woman, who has spent most of her adult life caring for a loathed and invalid mother, very recently deceased, and Theodora, a bohemian psychic with supposed clairvoyant capabilities. Luke Sanderson, the young man who stands to inherit Hill House from his relatives, also pledges his time for the summer

—Montague's lease states that the owners' interests must be represented during the experiment. To this group of four is added the peripheral presence of caretakers, Mr and Mrs Dudley, who refuse to stay near the house at night, and who seem to delight in frightening the outsiders with ambiguous and sinister statements about the house's history and the likely dire consequences of setting foot in it.

Although all four of the visitors begin to experience strange phenomena while in the house, including unseen noises, unexplained sensations, glimpses of spectral figures roaming the halls at night and strange writing on the walls, Eleanor is the focal point for much of this activity, and often seems to witness paranormal events of which the others are unaware. As readers, we begin to understand that Eleanor is unravelling; at least some of what she experiences may be the product or projection of a mind in dissolution. Here, Jackson leaves the relationship between cause and effect unclear: we wonder is the house working on Eleanor to precipitate her collapse, or is Eleanor's disturbed mental state producing tangible effects on and in the house?

For Eleanor, Hill House functions as a perverse sanctuary. In the same way R.D. Laing suggests madness might be the escape or sanctuary for the suffering individual trapped by intolerable circumstances. The house, formally the site and symbol of repression and imprisonment, is transformed by Eleanor into a kind of magical refuge. Eleanor finds respite from her own haunted past, and from the anxieties of a socially alienated present, in identifying not with the human inhabitants of Hill House who variously pity, patronise, exploit, suspect and torment her, nor with the house's former spectral occupants, but with Hill House itself. Eleanor is the ostensible 'victim' of the house, yet she positively relishes her flight from the orthodox, rational world of the real into an unfettered, aberrant existence.

These are just some of the dark complexities in which McCann's poems traffic, merging moments from across the house's long and morbid history into a single unsettling present, through a series of suggestive vignettes. The different perspectives and from within *Hill House*, combine to produce the signature voice of the house: gathering and releasing its troubled past in ghostly hints and glimpses, performing the very haunting it sets out to describe.

Just as Jackson's novel is a story of frustrated passions and repressed pain, McCann's poems also deal in the unsaid, the buried or deliberately obscured. I was intrigued by this sequence from the opening piece in which Abigail Crain, an early ostensible victim of the house and its inhabitants—first as an abused child, then as a fatally neglected old woman—is reimagined as

a malevolent and active participant in creating its dark legend. In McCann's retelling, Abigail trips the second Mrs. Crain with piano wire, before racing into the garden where she 'turns and/ Turns (someone is screaming) and/ Turns again until the grass falls up/ To meet her, arms crossed, fingertips/ Splayed at each shoulder the world's/ A dime spinning on its edge slowly/ Wobbling until it clatters down heads...' There is so much going on in these lines: the most disturbing of all is the image of the coin as it 'clatters down heads' evoking the clattered head of the second Mrs. Crain as she tumbles down the stairs. Then there's the disembodied scream that announces the accident. Is the noise produced by the second Mrs. Crain as she fell? By someone discovering her crumpled body? Or is Abigail herself screaming and unaware of it? It is also striking that Abigail's spinning tilts and skews perception. In a sequence of poems that explores warped psychological perspective this feels like a telling beginning. As she spins, Abigail's arms are crossed on her chest, her fingers splayed on either shoulder, creating an irresistible image of a body in its coffin. Abigail is thus dead and alive at the same time, both ghost and child, victim and perpetrator. McCann's minimal use of punctuation throughout the collection enhances the feeling of distorted experience and layered temporality to superb effect.

In both Jackson's novel, and in its 1963 film adaptation, experience is refracted through the prism of Eleanor's damaged psyche. Consequently, experience, whether natural or supernatural, is unreliable and partial. Readers cannot be sure what is going on, and Eleanor's own story is told through enigmatic, sometimes inadvertent fragments. She is always withholding more than she pretends, she is always revealing more than she intends. McCann's poems run with this tension, so that the obliquely lyrical 'Eleanor writes a poem' follows the more narratively solid, 'Answered an Ad', with its unromantic and eminently practical description of Eleanor's journey to Hill House. By placing these poems side by side, McCann signals the seething psychological currents beneath the surface of even the most mundane or outwardly plausible daily occurrence. What is particularly disturbing about 'Eleanor writes a poem' is the appearance of 'Daddy', who seems to stand simultaneously for Hill House's patriarch, the monstrous Hugh Crain, and for Eleanor's own father, who is a strangely absent figure within both the film and the novel on which it is based. Inside the compressed and intimate territory of the poem, identities intersect, multiply, and fragment. Something is being channelled or summoned. Something is bubbling to the surface. Who is possessing Eleanor? Abigail? Hill House? Or Eleanor? It feels significant that she signs her name to the poem.

The title of this sequence is *Deleted Scenes*, which is appropriate for a variety of reasons. As readers and audience, there's a sense in which we want a

definitive answer; the comfort of knowing whether the events portrayed were truly paranormal in nature or whether they were ‘all in the mind’ of a disturbed woman. The title gestures to a story beyond the story, a film behind the film. There’s a missing piece of the puzzle—erased, lost, repressed, that would—that should make everything clear. Yet the more we are shown, the more complex and tangled the story becomes. Poetry, I think, accommodates this complexity and entanglement in the way purely narrative art does not. The ‘deleted scenes’ might also stand for traumatic memory, which is characterised precisely by temporal gap, lacuna and aporia. Trauma disrupts our continuous coherent experience of time; traumatic memory is reiterative, interruptive, yet also approximate, existing beyond adequate representation. Traumatic testimony is riddled with memory loss, with blackouts and blank spaces, with contradictions, distortions, stutters and fugues. As the traumatised speaker heads towards the essence or centre of her testimony—the heart of her trauma—memory becomes elusive, illusive, and slippery. Trauma is a haunting, and this seems to me to be McCann’s most vivid subject.

In the final poem Dudley the caretaker is given the last word. This is satisfying because it allows the novel’s only real working-class character to escape his ‘sinister menial’ trope for something worldly-wise and solidly pragmatic. Yet his summation that ‘Truth that is: ain’t nothin’ in/ That house ‘cept dead air/ And stale memories’ is not as comforting as it might appear on the surface. If there is indeed no haunting in Hill House, then we are left with the inescapable conclusion that the true terror lies in what people do to people, and all the imperfect mechanisms of our escape.

McCann’s sequence is a terror story, a trauma story, a frightening but compassionate work for all those who suffer

Ronald David Laing, or R.D., as he was invariably known, developed the theory that mental illness was an escape mechanism that allowed individuals to free themselves from intolerable circumstances —K.M

As the second Mrs. Crain

Bustles smiling one hand on
Her swollen belly in what
Had been *her* Nursery,
Abigail crouches inside
A shadow as the second
Mrs. Crain steps out sensibly
Onto the landing (Nursery door
Slams shut behind her) she half
Turns her heel a lifting reflex
That doesn't quite clear piano
Wire taut invisible ankle height,
Glimpses Abigail wave hears
Laughter feels her lungs emptying
As Abigail (*wire snapped*) runs
Down backstairs (*balled in her palm*)
Out into garden cold dew between
Her toes that tickles, she turns and
Turns (*someone is screaming*) and
Turns again until the grass falls up
To meet her, arms crossed, fingertips
Splayed at each shoulder the world's
A dime spinning on its edge slowly
Wobbling until it clatters down heads...

In Her Perfect Story

There will always be
A child, rejected and despised,
Who sleeps in old ashes
Or sets out alone
With only her shadow
For company.

In her perfect story
There will always be
A magic mirror
Never telling the truth
And another
That always lies,
An ancient forest,
Impossible odds,
And a once loving heart
Now cold as ice.

In her perfect story
It is always night.

Hugh Crain

He never drags a shadow
Or notices the sun,
Always maintains an even pace,
Never been known to run.

His days go round in circles,
His nights are empty years,
He lives inside old photographs
Fattening on fear.

Answered an Ad

Pulls the apartment door towards her,
(it slowly clicks shut)
Picks up her bag,
Pads down backstairs,
Slips on her shoes,
Clack-taps echoing the basement car
Park, finds her old Ford,
Still starts first time,
Drives up the ramp, checks right
And left, *No traffic yet,*
Re-reads the directions that came
With his note,
Rolls down her window,
Grips the wheel gulping,
At long last sets off,
Chalked my name on the sidewalk,
Watched that night as rain washed
It off reaches the Freeway,
Still early, still quiet
But takes a Highway instead
As her sister wakes up crying,
Makes coffee until it's late enough
To phone *A shower of stones*
Cracked our roof tiles. Mother
Said it was neighbours who've
Never liked us mid-morning
She stops at a diner, drinks coffee,
Has doughnuts for breakfast,

Openly smokes and as she leaves
Brushing some man *beery breath*
Who whistles *and the wheels on*
The car go round and round and
Past a cop, parked by some billboard,
Asleep *Round and round and round*
Overtakes a school bus, jaundiced,
Empty *Round and* reaches her turn off,
Checks herself in the mirror,
Practices smiling.

Eleanor writes a poem

Daddy

*After the tide stopped turning
And there was nothing left to oppose,
After the sky stopped falling
But before the oceans froze,
After the trees stopped breathing,
As the last moon rose,
After the dead voices singing
Were just forgotten echoes*

That's when his heart stopped beating

That's when this world turned cold.

Eleanor Lance

I am the one

Who set out that morning,
Instructions laid out
On the passenger seat.

I am the one
Who, after driving all day,
Slowed through that town

But when I wound down my window
To ask last minute directions
Had my *pardon me sir*
Or *'scuse me there mam*
Get no more response
Than some panhandling bum.

I am the one
Who was last to arrive
(So the caretaker said
Then smiled at his wife)
I am the one
Who followed that last curving stretch
And when the house pounced
Just past that tree stump
(Where the first Mrs. Crain was killed)
I hung in a vacuum
Head in a vice
Cold freshly scalped

I am the one whose mind
Changed right there.

I am the one who turned back.

Their First Night

She thought.
I could fall asleep right now
Or dare a drink like Daddy did
Or even dare a few
And meditate on
Every pile of soiled linen,
Every slow motion walk
From bedroom to bathroom
And then back again,
Mother's final *That'll do!*
Her dry goodnight kiss:
That sick room smell
Of scented soap and ammonia,
And my every guilty midnight
Prayer: Oh Jesus make it stop!

Asleep

Every face
She's forced to wear
Throughout the day
Falls away,
Dead leaves
Off an Autumn tree,
Until,
Herself emerging

Eleanor breaks free.

Let Down

Waited
Long past the time
He told her they'd meet,
Waited
'till after the movie'd begun,
Waited
Telling herself
He might just still come,
Waited
Willing him
To pound round that corner,
Wade through thin traffic
Breathless and grinning
Real sorry Nell, sorry am late
Then they'd laugh, she'd
Forgive him, suggest a walk
Instead
 she wakes
In Hill House
Still holding hands
With someone not there.

That First Morning

She slips out of bed early,
Pulls on her robe,
Slides back the drapes,
Dares herself to go downstairs
(And maybe leave
A trail of breadcrumbs)
Thick carpet underfoot,
Polished wood,
The smell of beeswax,
Front door ajar:
And once outside,
Cold dew between
Her toes that tickles,
She turns and turns and
Turns again until the grass
Falls up to meet her,
Arms crossed,
Fingertips splayed
At each shoulder
The world's a dime
Spinning on its edge
Slows wobbling
Clatters down heads
Up just like Daddy
Last time she saw him
And he looked fast asleep.

Journey's End

A breeze brushes under her hand
Like the back of some neverending cat
My cat was called Dancer
Then stretches ahead flattening grass
And as Eleanor follows,
Bounds over a stream

Where the sun's
Turned to Midnight
And Eleanor follows
Through the moon's filigree

*This is where I could meet him
Wearing the dress I've stitched
Secretly and we would wander
The hills until we found a hidden
Valley and we'd make our bed
In a hollow tree and live on
Acorns and wild strawberries
And I will love my love with
An E because he is enchanted*

Dudley the Caretaker

So you wanna hear 'bout
Doors that always swing
Shut mysteriously, 'bout
Old Missus Crane dying
Alone and how some folks
Claim the house is never empty.

Wanna hear 'bout cold spots
Desp'rat messages scrawled
Up on walls, Midnight
Weeping or that crazy woman
Killed herself rather than leave.
Well you listen now to the only
Truth that is: ain't nothin' in
That house 'cept dead air
And stale memories: think me
Or the wife'd set foot if there were?

