

NIGHT GAUNTS

AN ENTERTAINMENT
BASED ON THE LIFE AND WRITINGS
OF
H. P. LOVECRAFT

by

BRETT RUTHERFORD



GRIM REAPER BOOKS

New York Providence

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GRIM REAPER BOOKS

are published by

THE POET'S PRESS

84 Columbia Terrace #2/ Weehawken NJ 07087



ABOUT THIS BOOK

The first draft of this play was written as a special commemoration for the 50th Anniversary of Lovecraft's death. It was written after I attended a ceremony organized by Carl Johnson, a Rhode Island-born actor and Lovecraft fan. A few days later, I wrote the poem, "At Lovecraft's Grave," and conceived the idea of publishing the poem as a chapbook. As I had recently done with a book of poems by Edgar Allan Poe and Sarah Helen Whitman, I also envisioned a publishing party in which actors would bring Lovecraft back to life.



The Providence Athenaeum was enthusiastic about hosting the event, an ideal setting since Lovecraft lived across the street just before his death in 1937. A one-hour first draft of *Night Gaunts* was created and a cast of professional actors and actresses and readers was assembled. We chose the March 15th weekend for 1988 for the premiere—a time chosen to coincide with the annual visit of Lovecraftians to Providence.

Carl Johnson, who had personally undertaken the local memorial program for Lovecraft, turned out to be an actor well suited to play the role of the Old Gent. His make-up and demeanor startled and delighted all of us. Two fine actresses brought to life Lovecraft's mother and wife: Rose-Anna Semich was Susan Phillips Lovecraft and Susan Bowen was Sonia Greene. The disembodied voices in the script were performed by Stuart Blazer, Pieter Vanderbeck, and Brett Rutherford.

The staged reading, on Sunday March 13, 1988, was sold out, and the work was well-received, as was the chapbook published that day, *At Lovecraft's Grave*. That limited edition is now unavailable.

The 90-minute, two-act version of *Night Gaunts* was written for the Lovecraft Centennial in 1990. It was performed in a staged reading at The Providence Athenaeum on Tuesday, September 30, 1990. Carl Johnson recreated his role as Lovecraft and Susan Bowen returned for a much more extensive portrayal of Sonia. The role of Lovecraft's mother was so admirably acted by Kristen Marie Hardy that I wrote an extra "mad scene" for her as the Act One curtain. The voices were played by Robert North, Pieter Vanderbeck and Brett Rutherford. In both productions, the recorded voice of Lovecraft's mother was performed by Eileen McNamara, and the voice of the child Lovecraft by Charles Denby.

The longer version of the play was well-received by a sold-out house, and there have been many inquiries about repeat performances. I doubt whether there will be much local interest in this play now that the Lovecraft centennial is past, but the publication of this script may help the play find its way to more remote venues.

This play may be performed, with permission, for non-profit and educational uses only. Because of copyright assignments for the dramatic rights to Lovecraft stories, it is not possible to enact certain Lovecraft stories on stage without elaborate permissions, and the lawyers for the various estates involved are notorious for their dilatory replies. *Night Gaunts* offers instead a purely biographical and literary study of Lovecraft which avoids these dilemmas. No stories are acted out, but excerpts from his writing serves to illustrate his style, and the possible connections between his tale and his personal life.

Lovecraft's dialogues and monologues are based partially on his letters, the rest on an imaginative reconstruction of his conversation based on his known mannerisms and habits. The text contains hundreds of Lovecraft "sound bites," woven together to create the impression of an evening spent in the company of this wonderfully eccentric man. The dialogue of Sonia is based upon her actual memoirs.

The script of this play can be performed as a radio play with little or no adaptation. Directors may inquire about the availability of original music in score or on tape.

The poem, *At Lovecraft's Grave*, and several other Lovecraft-related pieces, are included at the end of this book.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT

MALE VOICE #1

Narration of fiction and poetry

Male gossip #1

Doctor

MALE VOICE #2

Narration of fiction and poetry

Male gossip #2

Priest

MALE VOICE #3

Narration of fiction and poetry

Madman's monologue from "The Rats in the Walls"

Banker

SUSAN PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT,

Mother of H.P. Lovecraft

MAY ALSO DOUBLE

FEMALE VOICE #1

Narration of fiction and poetry

Female gossip #1

Nurse

Screaming woman (Nahum's wife)

SONIA GREENE LOVECRAFT,

Wife of H.P. Lovecraft

MAY ALSO DOUBLE

FEMALE VOICE #2

Narration of fiction and poetry

Female gossip #2

Nurse

CHILD'S VOICE

(heard on tape recording only)



ACT ONE

MUSICAL PRELUDE as house lights dim and dim stage light reveals:

SETTING: Sitting room of the home of Howard Phillips Lovecraft. The winter of 1936-37. Lovecraft is seated in a winged chair, next to him a small antique table of Georgian design with an unlit lamp, a stack of writing paper and pen and ink. There is a simple wooden chair or stool behind the desk. Various papers litter the floor where they have been carelessly dropped. A porcelain tea service sits neglected on a silver tray on the floor next to the table. Draped over another chair is a long, English-style overcoat. Books are everywhere, on shelves and in stacks on the floor.

The back of the stage contains one door. One window with interior shutters at stage right.

Lovecraft, seated in the upholstered chair, is writing a letter, squinting in the dimness of dusk light. He does not turn on the lamp. He pauses, puts down the pen, and leans back in the chair. His hand moves into his threadbare jacket to clutch his stomach and he grimaces in pain. He leans back in the chair and closes his eyes; his other hand drops toward the floor.

(The stage darkens during the following.)

(SOUND EFFECTS: Wind—flapping wings—bird calls. A child screams, waking from a nightmare.)

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Opening door and running into child's room.) Howard! Child, what is it?

CHILD'S VOICE

It was them again, Mother—the Night Gaunts. They carried me away.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

Have you been into those gothic novels of your grandfather's again? Haven't I told you to mind your lessons instead? See what those awful books do to you!

CHILD'S VOICE

No, Mother, it wasn't the books. Or even a dream. They were real. There were dozens of them, black and rubbery, with wings and talons. They carried me through the air, tossed me like a toy from one to the other. They were taking me to their nest in the mountains.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

You silly boy. It's midnight. You can see the windows are locked, the curtains are drawn. Not even a ladybug could get in here. You're just thinking of those crows you saw last summer—and that dead thing they were picking away at. It upset you so.

CHILD'S VOICE

These were not crows, Mother. They were Night Gaunts. I know that's what they're called. They have bat wings, and long tails.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Insistent) It's just your imagination... *(Soothing)* My poor, precious Howard... just those filthy crows.

CHILD'S VOICE

(Agitated) No, they aren't like birds at all. They don't have beaks. They don't even have feathers. I saw them as clear as day. In fact—

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Irritated) That's enough, Howard. You'll ruin your health with these incessant nightmares.

CHILD'S VOICE

(Doggedly) In fact, Mother, they were so close, I could see the reptilian scales on their heads. And they had no faces... NO FACES AT ALL!

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Alarmed) Howard!.... *(A pause, as Mother turns aside and moves away from Howard's bedside. She is speaking to someone in the doorway.)* What can we do for this boy, Annie? I have to look after him every moment. He's so sensitive. And

such a homely child—every time I look at him I see his father. Whatever will become of him? *(A pause.)*

CHILD'S VOICE

(Quietly) Mother?

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Returning to the bedside.) No more, Howard, please.

CHILD'S VOICE

Mother, will it happen to me, too? Is that why I see the Night Gaunts? Is it happening already?

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

Is what happening?

CHILD'S VOICE

Will I go insane like Father? Will they take me away to Butler Hospital, too?

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Distinctly, aloof.) We will not...speak of that. What happened to your father will not happen to you. Or to me. Now go to sleep.

CHILD'S VOICE

But the Night Gaunts—

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

There are no Night Gaunts. No monsters, Howard. We don't have to have monsters. Men and women are quite bad enough already. The way they gossip and cheat and lie. In two years it will be 1900 and men are still no better than savages. Now no more about your Night Gaunts...they are not real.

(Mother closes the door. A pause... The boy shifts in his blankets and sheets... wind and wingbeats... Lights up. Lovecraft turns on the lamp and reads from the letter he was writing:)

LOVECRAFT

I have not seen the Night Gaunts since those nightmares 34 years ago. They carried me through infinite leagues of black air, over the towers of dead and horrible cities. Up we would go, into a gray void, so high that mountains miles below would be pinnacles like needles. Then they would toss me back and forth.

I wondered who built the cities, and from whence came the strange, piping flutes and barbaric drumbeats. That was years before I dreamt of the Elder Gods and their cities. It's as if the Night Gaunts were leading me there, showing me the territory.

(Sighs, picks up pen.) But when I was eight I grew interested in science and cast off my last shred of religion and other superstitious belief. Oh, I was well prepared for it—I knew my letters at two and was reading at four. By my venerable eighth year I had been through hundreds of tomes from Grandfather's library. The classics paganized me—the Age of Reason civilized me.

(Puts down pen, folds and seals letter in envelope. He picks up a stack of sealed envelopes on the table and counts them.)

That's ten letters today. A poor showing...at least five more epistles need answering. How many have I written—eighty thousand, maybe a hundred thousand? What a hecatomb of papyrus! I've frittered away my time on correspondence, a dreadful vice, although not nearly as painful as my verse.

(Quotes, with his hand raised and in a formal tone.) "Mature as moonshine Booze, and free from Bunk as the frank Perfume of the candid Skunk." Still, I have had my moments...

MALE VOICE #1

Out of what crypt they crawl, I cannot tell,
But every night I see the rubbery things,
Black, horned and slender, with membranous wings,
And tails that bear the bifid barb of hell.
They come in legions on the north wind's swell
With obscene clutch that titillates and stings,

Snatching me off on monstrous voyagings
To grey worlds hidden deep in nightmare's well.

MALE VOICE #2

Over the jagged peaks of Thok they sweep,
Heedless of all the cries I try to make,
And down the nether pits to that foul lake
Where the puffed shoggoths splash in doubtful sleep.
But oh! If only they would make some sound,
Or wear a face where faces should be found!

LOVECRAFT

Ultimately, science is more important than poetry. The poet is not a prophet. He is in truth more often wrong than right, since he is always led by unreliable sympathies and caprices. Who could effect a more perfect formula for human misery than the poet who asserted that "Beauty is Truth, and Truth Beauty"?

The steel-cold man of intelligence—not the glowing bard—is the one who gets the closest to the truth—the question of what is and what isn't. Poetry and art are for beauty—science and philosophy are for truth.

I should know about the folly of poetry. In my teens and twenties I did little else. My nights were divided between amateur astronomy and the writing of Georgian verse. My days were spent in sleep, or in skull-wracking seizures of migraine. The headaches came often—three times a week. For days I lay like Roderick Usher, unable to bear light, crouched beneath pillows to avoid the slightest noise.

My nocturnal world kept me away from the tawdry commercial life of the city—the begetting of money and the rattling nuisance of delivery trucks and repairmen. These seemed to exist only as a footnote—as the least important, autonomous events underpinning a gentlemanly life.

My childhood seemed to have been designed to make me an outsider. My mother was talented—more spirited by far than my more conventional aunts—but she would not hear of me associating with the common lot of children. (*Closes his eyes*)

MALE VOICE #1

There's that boy in the garden across the street. The one who never plays.

FEMALE VOICE #2

You say he hides when the other boys come along?

MALE VOICE #1

Yes, that's what he does. And he always has a book.

FEMALE VOICE #2

Do the other boys torment him? He looks so delicate!

MALE VOICE #1

They never bother him. They hardly see him. He hides behind those shrubs.

FEMALE VOICE #2

This summer he had a tent there. I went over and talked with him. He said he had become an Arab and was learning sorcery.

MALE VOICE #1

Ah, the Arabian Nights! Harmless enough.

FEMALE VOICE #2

He was so clever. He had even made up a name for himself. Abdul Alhazred. And he was writing in a most beautiful hand—the old fashioned kind of writing we learned in school.

MALE VOICE #1

Ah, there's his mother come to fetch him. She's so pale.

FEMALE VOICE #2

That's the arsenic.

MALE VOICE #1

Arsenic?

FEMALE VOICE #2

(Quieter) She eats arsenic to keep her complexion pale. She could easily marry again. Her father has a considerable fortune. It was tragic what happened to that family.

MALE VOICE #1

Winfield Scott Lovecraft. A travelling man. He brought it upon himself.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

Where is that boy? *(Calling)* Howard! Howard! *(Pauses)* There you are. I told you not to go outside the garden. You know the other children can't bear to look at your face. And put that book back in your grandfather's library. The bright sun isn't good for the leather bindings. Then go up to your room and your Aunt Annie will bring you some milk.

LOVECRAFT

When I was a boy I sometimes overheard things I was not meant to know about. I did not always understand, but through my voracious reading I soon gained an adult's comprehension of the things that men and women do. Standing behind a door I heard my mother and the family doctor...

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

(Steps forward from chorus and addresses Mother.) Mrs. Lovecraft, I have troubling news for you.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

Tell me, doctor. Spare me nothing. Will Winfield recover?

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

He will live. He has not had any hallucinations since we brought him back from Chicago. He could live for some years yet, but he will not recover.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

Whatever do you mean? Will he be an invalid? Is he mad?

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

We must watch him closely. The disease has overtaken his system. I fear it is rather advanced.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Pauses, hesitating.) You said, the disease. What do you mean, precisely?

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

(Clearing his throat.) There is a certain disease, madame, which we are very reluctant to speak of. I am very embarrassed to bring its name before a lady in her own home.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

And Winfield has contracted this...this...condition.

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

I'm sorry. There can be no doubt. Winfield Scott has had it for some time.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

For how long?

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

A year, two years perhaps. I hate to be indelicate, but it will be necessary to examine you and the child. The germ you see, is spread—it is passed...

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Rearing up) I know perfectly well how it is spread, Doctor. Every educated woman knows. I assure you no examination will be necessary. He did not acquire this thing from me, nor did he pass it to his child.

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

Still, it would be prudent.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

Nor could he have passed it to me since. (*A pause.*) He has not touched me—not since Howard was born. I could not bear it. (*Turning away.*) These are things no one should speak of, but there, I have said it.

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

If you are absolutely certain, I will not insist.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

I had letters telling me of Winfield's ... adventures. After a while he made no secret that there had been many. He was unrepentant. From the moment I knew—

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

I ascertain your meaning, Mrs. Lovecraft. You protected yourself. I cannot tell you in how many houses—on this very street, even—the doors are closed at night between husband and wife. It is a terrible age.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

And there is no cure?

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

Sometimes we can effect a treatment with metallic salts if the disease is caught early. But once the brain and nerves are affected ... paresis... blindness ... madness ... death. (*Shakes his head.*)

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

You will take him to the hospital, then?

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

To Butler, Mrs. Lovecraft.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

My father will arrange it, then.

MALE VOICE #1 (DOCTOR)

Although, we could arrange for him to be cared for at home....

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

No. It would be better for everyone concerned. No one must see him this way. The wretched man...he has ruined us all. (*Mother and the Doctor fade back into the Chorus.*)

LOVECRAFT

So Father vanished onto the grounds of Butler Hospital. We visited—at first, often—then, as his condition worsened, my mother would not take me. Then he was dead. I did not see the body—just the box being lowered into the earth at Swan Point.

My grandfather's fortune declined. (His dam in Idaho collapsed—he built another—and it collapsed.) Servants and luxuries were cut back.

The sudden death of Gramp meant the closure and sale of the palatial Phillips manse. We moved a few blocks away to Number 598 Angell. A modest apartment, sans servants and brow to brow with pestiferous neighbors.

I watched Mother and Aunt Annie go through the library, boxing books for the auction. It gave me a shiver on Gramp's behalf. He once told me, "If there's anything worse than dying, it's having your library sold off!" All those eighteenth century treasures—gone forever!

FEMALE VOICE #1

There he is again! See him over there sitting on the steps of the Phillips house? Doesn't he know they don't live there any more? Doesn't he know it was sold when Whipple Philips died?

FEMALE VOICE #2

He goes there every day after school. Refuses to go to his own house. He just sits on the porch steps, as if he expected someone to come and hand him the keys—give him the house back.

LOVECRAFT

We had a small settlement. The proceeds from my father's estate, from Gramp, and from the sale of the house were prudently invested. But somehow my mother became obsessed with the fear that we would one day be indigent.

Had these calamities not pressed in on us, I might have made that natural progression to become a man of letters. While my schooling was irregular—Mother and the family doctor kept me out for several years—I still might have gone on to Brown and from thence to some scholarly nook.

God knows I would have been at home among those wheezing ancients who teach Greek and Latin—those unreconstructed classicists—although I would have been soundly rejected by the students with their penchant for Socialism.

You smile at my scorn for the radicals? My friends think me an ordinary conservative. I am no such thing. Most people are conservative because they have a morbid terror of doing their own thinking. I am a conservative because I am a cynic and a pagan. Christianity as the mob practices it is pretty repellent stuff— just a Jewish cult that indulges in ritual cannibalism.

I once thought of a life devoted to astronomy. Astronomy is a pure and clean and rational thing. I was spared the drudgery and mathematics and saw only the sheer adventure of it. I bicycled up to Ladd Observatory where I was permitted to observe the movements of the moon, the planets, the stars. Although I was still a mere child, several newspapers carried my astronomy columns, penned and by-lined by H.P. Lovecraft. I especially enjoyed debunking that appalling and frivolous pseudo-science called astrology.

MUSIC CUE #2 (A portion of the Overture is replayed on a celeste while the Voices intone the following names resonantly:)

MALE VOICE #1

Aldebaran!

MALE VOICE #2

Rigel!

FEMALE VOICE #1

Betelgeuse!

MALE VOICE #1

Antares in the Scorpion!

MALE VOICE #2

The shimmering Pleiades mourning their vanished sister!

FEMALE VOICE #1

Cold Arcturus who shattered the sleep of Mrs. Whitman!

MALE VOICE #1

Implacable Orion, reeling above Poe as he lifted the bottle of laudanum...

FEMALE VOICE #2

Sadly this star I mistrust! (*Music ends*).

LOVECRAFT

Poe and his Helen were obsessed with certain stars, too. I wrote a little verse called "Astrophobos" about how the neutral and eternal stars can become an object of horror.

FEMALE VOICE #2

Crimson burned the star of madness
As behind the beams I peered,
All was woe that seemed but gladness
Ere my gaze with Truth was seared.
Cacodaemons, mired with madness
Through the fevered flickering leered.

MALE VOICE #2

Now I know the fiendish fable
That the golden glitter bore;
Now I shun the spangled sable
That I watched and loved before;
But the horror, set and stable,
Haunts my soul forevermore!

LOVECRAFT

A man of science should blush to hear such lines quoted back to him. And yet it was in the realm of the fantastic—the eldritch and terrible—that I was to gain what pitiful renown I have enjoyed. I peopled the earth with Cthulhu and the Elder Gods—unspeakable obscenities banished here by the Great Old Ones. Another monster—He Who Is Not to Be Named—dwells in the Hyades. A race of great telepathic beings live on Yuggoth, the black trans-Neptunian planet that astronomers have yet to discover.

Still, the stars were clean and uncomplicated. Next to them what I love best is Providence itself. (*Opens window for a moment and gazes out, then closes the shutter.*) Not the people, mind you—I have little contact with persons—but the city as it exists from the hours of twilight until sunrise. This is the pure Providence—history as architecture—which I can explore as a traveler might turn over the stones of a necropolis...not what man is—a teeming, nasty, hive-like creature—but what he builds and leaves behind.

FEMALE VOICE #1

Howard was a rationalist, a keen eighteenth century mind. And yet when he picked up his pen he could make a post office—a laundry—the waiting room of a doctor's office—any mundane human dwelling—sound like the vestibule of hell.

MALE VOICE #2

I've had a letter from Howard today. Just listen to this:

MALE VOICE #1

Providence is in truth a more extensive,
varied and colorful city than I had ever suspected,
and I mean to see more of its curious wonders.
There is much of the ancient waterfront to explore—
the east front
where all the houses and warehouses are Colonial,
and the west front
where Colonial vestiges
lurk furtively amidst the factories, coal-pockets and gas-works.
We walked to the southerly section

west of the Great Bridge, around Richmond and Chestnut Streets,
now sunk to slums...

Here indeed I found a world of wonder!

Not a stone's throw from the traveled business section,
tucked quietly in behind Broad and Weybosset Streets,
lurk the beginnings of a squalid Colonial labyrinth
in which I moved as an utter stranger,
each moment wondering

whether I was in my native town,
or in some leprous, distorted
witch-Salem of fever or nightmare.

This ancient and pestilential reticulation
of crumbling cottages and decaying doorways
was like nothing I had ever beheld
save in dream—

it was the 18th century of Goya....

I wandered up hills

where rotting Doric columns
rested on worn stone steps.

Rusted footscrapers rose like malignant fungi.

Dirty, small-paned windows
leered malevolently,
and sometimes glasslessly,
from gouged sockets.

There was a fog,

and out of it and into it again

moved dark monstrous, DISEASED shapes.

They may have been people,

or what once were,

or might have been, people....

FEMALE VOICE #2

Here's a new tale by that Lovecraft fellow...the Providence recluse. It's
called "The Shunned House." Listen to how it begins:

FEMALE VOICE #1

Edgar Allan Poe came here
to woo the poetess,
Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman,
in 1848 and 1849.
Poe generally stopped at the Mansion House on Benefit Street—
the renamed Golden Ball Inn
whose roof has sheltered Washington, Jefferson and Lafayette—
and his favorite walk led northward along the same street
to Mrs. Whitman's home
and the neighborhood churchyard of St. John's,
whose hidden expanse of eighteenth century gravestones
had for him a peculiar fascination.
In this walk, so many times repeated,
the world's greatest master of the terrible and the bizarre
was obliged to pass a particular house
on the eastern side of the street; a dingy, antiquated structure
perched on the abruptly rising side-hill,
with a great unkempt yard...

MALE VOICE #2

In my childhood
the shunned house was vacant,
with barren, gnarled and terrible old trees,
long, queerly pale grass,
and nightmarishly misshapen weeds
in the high terraced yard
where birds never lingered.
We boys used to overrun the place,
and I can still recall my youthful terror
not only at the morbid strangeness of the sinister vegetation,
but at the eldritch atmosphere and odour
of the dilapidated house,
whose unlocked front door was often entered
in quest of shudders.
The small paned windows were largely broken,
and a nameless air of desolation

hung round the precarious paneling,
peeling wallpaper,
falling plaster,
rickety staircases,
and such fragments of battered furniture
as still remained.

The dust and cobwebs added their touch of the fearful,
and brave indeed was the boy
who would voluntarily ascend the ladder to the attic....
But it was the dank, humid cellar
which somehow exerted the strongest repulsion on us,
even though it was wholly above ground on the street side,
with only a thin door and window-pierced brick wall
to separate it from the busy sidewalk....

For one thing,
the bad odor of the house was strongest there;
and for another thing
we did not like the white fungous growths
which occasionally sprang up in rainy summer weather
from the hard earth floor.

Those fungi,
grotesquely like the vegetation in the yard outside,
were truly horrible in their outlines;
detestable parodies of toadstools and Indian pipes...
They rotted quickly,
and at one stage became slightly phosphorescent;
so that nocturnal passers-by
sometimes spoke of witch-fires
glowing behind the broken panes
of the foeter-spreading windows....

(MUSIC CUE #3. The sound of bells, playing the main theme from the
Overture.)

LOVECRAFT

Mother began to decline markedly—

FEMALE GOSSIP #2

I saw Susie Phillips Lovecraft on the Butler Avenue Streetcar today. We were only three blocks from her house and she cried out—

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Alarmed) Where am I? What is this place? I don't know where I am!

FEMALE GOSSIP #2

It was most alarming. One poor old man looked as if he would leap off the car. Susie kept shrieking until the conductor got someone to walk her home.

MALE GOSSIP #1

She stands in the hedges by the house at dusk. She says that's when THEY come out.

LOVECRAFT

She began to fancy that creatures of a vague and indefinable nature emerged at dusk from the corners of her room. She developed a complete obsession about light and geometry. Furniture and draperies were moved, lamps thrown helter skelter, but still they intruded. Finally it became necessary to— *(Pauses, lowers his head with a pained expression)*

FEMALE GOSSIP #2

Have you heard about Susie Lovecraft? She's been committed—to Butler Hospital! Just like her husband before her! The poor family! That poor young man!

MALE GOSSIP #2

It may run in the family, you know. We should keep an eye out.

(Howard crosses to the edge of the stage. Mother leaves the chorus and they walk together, ending at the rear stage door.)

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

Howard, you don't look well. You haven't been eating properly.

LOVECRAFT

I'm fine, mother. Aunt Annie is a fine cook.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

But I'm sure she doesn't bring you milk, the way I always do when you stay up writing all night.

LOVECRAFT

She tries to do everything exactly as you would want it, Mother. Look at the swans on the Seekonk over there.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

It's cold here, Howard. It's getting much too late in the year to meet here on the grounds. You've never come into the building.

LOVECRAFT

(Maneuvers her toward door.) I'll walk you to the door. Later I'll send some flowers, and some of those chocolates you asked for—

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

I'd forsake all that if you would just come in. The room they have given me is most unsuitable. It gets dark much too soon in the afternoon and the lamps are inadequate. You know I must have the light to keep THEM from getting through. Oh, do come in, Howard.

LOVECRAFT

Mother, you know...I...cannot.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Growing agitated.) I've been here for a year and a half. You've never come in.

LOVECRAFT

Aunt Annie comes in. I call every day. We have delightful walks here.

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

If only you could *see* them, Howard. The way they hide in the shadows, moving in and out so no one else can see them. They'll be there as clear as can be, and then when the nurse comes, they shuffle off into the shadows. They're so wily.

LOVECRAFT

I must be going now, Mother. We're almost to the door. *(They reach the door. Mother backs into the doorway, Lovecraft holds back.)*

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Receding into doorway, as if attendants are pulling her in.) They wait until the room is dark. When there's a moon I can barely feel them, just the ends of their fingers grazing against my cheek. On a moonless night they become solid. They hurt me, Howard— *(Lovecraft closes the door on her with an expression of anguish.)*

MUSIC CUE #4: CONFUSED BELL SOUNDS. Lovecraft crosses stage to window during the music.

LOVECRAFT

(Brokenly) She told everyone there about her son the poet. If she had only recovered from her surgery, she might have ultimately returned home. We could have looked after her.

FEMALE VOICE #2

Lovecraft has a tale in *Amazing Stories* this month. It's called "The Colour Out of Space." It's about the aftermath of the fall of a meteorite on a New England farm.

MALE VOICE #1

After the meteor fell...
the word passed from mouth to mouth—

FEMALE VOICE #2

There's poison in Nahum's ground!

MALE VOICE #2

The trees budded prematurely...
and at night they swayed ominously in the wind.
Nahum's second son Thaddeus, a lad of fifteen,
swore that they swayed also when there was no wind;
but even the gossips would not credit this...

FEMALE VOICE #2

All the orchard trees blossomed forth in strange colors,
and through the stony soil of the yard...
no sane wholesome colors were to be seen
except in the green grass and leafage...

MALE VOICE #1

The "Dutchman's breeches" became a thing of sinister menace,
and the bloodroots grew insolent in their chromatic perversion...
In May the insects came,
and Nahum's place became a nightmare of buzzing and crawling.
Most of the creatures seemed not quite usual
in their aspects and motions,
and their nocturnal habits
contradicted all former experience.
The Gardners took to watching at night...
Thaddeus had been right about the trees...
the boughs surely moved, and there was no wind.

FEMALE VOICE #2

Toward the end of May the milk began to be bad.

MALE VOICE #2

Then Nahum had the cows driven to the uplands,
after which this trouble ceased.

No one was surprised
when the news of Mrs. Gardner's madness stole around.
It happened in June,
about the anniversary of the meteor's fall,
and the poor woman screamed about things in the air
which she could not describe.
In her raving there was not a single specific noun,
but only verbs and pronouns.
Things moved and changed and fluttered,
and ears tingled to impulses
which were not wholly sounds.
Something was taken away—
she was being drained of something—
something was fastening itself on her that ought not to be—

FEMALE VOICE #1 (SCREAMING WOMAN)

(Agitated, on the verge of hysteria) It's COLD, but it BURNS, and it sucks
the life out of you...

MALE VOICE #2

Nothing was ever still in the night—
the walls and windows shifted.
Nahum did not send her to the county asylum,
but let her wander about the house
as long as she was harmless to herself and others....
But when the boys grew afraid of her...
he decided to keep her locked in the attic.
By July she had ceased to speak and crawled on all fours,
and before that month was over
Nahum got the mad notion
that she was slightly luminous in the dark ...

SUSAN LOVECRAFT

(Stepping forward from Chorus as Lovecraft closes his eyes.) I will not consent
to this surgery. I will NOT consent, doctor, unless you promise me about the
lights. *(Pauses, as if carrying on a conversation.)*

Of course it's important. It's vital. I may be sleeping...I may be unconscious...and then anything could happen. The lights must be on at all times. At no time must those corners fall into shadow.

Something about corners? Well you wouldn't know, of course. It took me years to understand. Not just any corners, mind you. Only perfectly square corners where the walls meet the ceiling...an intersection of three planes. A mathematician could explain it...my son Howard could explain it. Such corners are weak places, like little mouse holes. They see us through them. They watch us. If it's dark enough, they come out.

Has anyone else seen them? Howard told me he has, many times. He saw them as a child and I didn't believe him. Don't nod like that, as though you're humoring me.

Who are they? *(With growing rancor.)* They...They...THEY! Around and among us...in the dust and the dead leaves...squeezing out of corners. What do they want? Hah! What do they all want? To touch! Oh, subtle at first, like a gentle breeze. Then one day something as cold as ice tried to put its hand on me. One was in my bedclothes. Another brushed against me as I was dressing. Not shadows. Things that live IN shadows. Gaunt. Malevolent. Lustful. Filthy things, like dustrags.

(Runs her hands through her hair, leaving it in disarray.) What do they want? *(Desperately)* WHAT DO THEY WANT? *(Blackout)*