

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1*

*Stephanie Manuzak*

### **The Wake**

Owen had some legitimate reasons not to drive to Maryland for his uncle's wake. In the summers he didn't teach so he stitched together a patchwork of odd jobs to pay the rent, and a potential client wanted to see sketches for a mural on the side of her new café. There was work of his own, a series of small paintings, that he wanted to get done. Less legitimately, I-95 was horribly congested on summer weekends, and his car's air conditioner wasn't doing so well. The biggest reason Owen admitted to himself for his reluctance, however, was that he would rather pull out his own little toenail than go back to his aunt and uncle's house.

On the phone, his mother listened sympathetically as he waxed about his work. Yet she concluded the call by saying "I really hope you'll be able to make it." When he was a child and teenager, she would say, "get your butt down here, mister!" Things were retranslated now that he was an adult, but "I really hope you'll make it" was pretty much the same thing.

On a hot late June afternoon Owen and his mother carried two folding chairs up the driveway of his aunt and late uncle's home. The dog barking furiously behind the chicken-wire fence drew his eye: it had a crooked hop as it bounded back and forth. As he got closer Owen realized the dog was missing a hind leg and part of its tail, and one of its rolling eyes was glazed over as if coated with glue.

"Chupa, quiet!" one of his cousins, Eric or Brian, yelled from around the corner of the house. Owen immediately guessed the dog's full name. Chupa. Chupacabra, of course.

When he was fourteen he had stayed with his aunt and uncle for a couple of months. The dog they had then was called Sasquatch. She was large and hairy, appropriate enough to the name, only instead of being a reclusive and mysterious creature, she was underfoot or in Owen's face everywhere he went. He had only been in the house for a minute when she barreled into the room, planted her paws on Owen's chest and attempted to smother him with and the worst case of reeking dog breath he'd ever smelled.

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"Sasquatch, down!" Aunt Kat said. "Sorry Owen, she's a little too friendly sometimes. Just tell her no if she does that, okay? Here, we'll put you in Brian's room."

Owen followed his aunt down the hall. On the way, he glanced through the door at the back of the dining room, out onto the sun porch. Were it not for the porch, staying at his aunt and uncle's might be almost tolerable. It was divided into two halves: Aunt Kat's half, with a blue rocking armchair in the corner and shelves of mystery novels, was the normal half. The other half, Uncle Jerry's "office," also looked normal at first glance. There were bookshelves, a corkboard with newspaper articles on the wall, and a messy desk piled with photocopies and legal pads.

A closer inspection revealed why many adults were so overly kind to Owen's cousins, and why many of the same snickered when his uncle's name was mentioned. It was why their home was egged every year on Halloween night, and often on other nights as well. It was why Owen would've rather stayed with anyone than his aunt and uncle.

The bookshelf to the right of the desk held a jumble of books and also half a dozen white plaster casts of elongated, humanlike feet. On the bottom shelves were twenty-six volumes of "Mysteries of Space and Time." Photos and printouts tacked to the wall all around showed night skies with grainy specks of light, Uncle Jerry at conventions with various "scientists," and indifferent shots of trees and shadows, including the famous image of a gorilla-like creature walking upright through the woods. That one was in the place of honor above the desk. A potted fern stood on top of the right-hand bookshelf, as if, Owen thought with disdain, to declare that this was all normal.

A few years ago Owen had thought his uncle's half of the sunroom interesting and a little unnerving, like one of the shows on the Discovery Channel that his mother didn't like him watching. He came to realize later what people thought of someone who was a self-proclaimed amateur cryptozoologist, and that they were largely put in the same category as people who thought that aliens made the Great Pyramids or that the world would end in the year 2000. What evoked in Owen the

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greatest loathing was the fact that his uncle didn't even try to hide it. He wore "U.S. Cryptozoology Association Convention" t-shirts, a new one every year, in public. The text stretched over his beer gut.

Uncle Jerry had been normal until he worked as an electrical supervisor on the construction of the new mall. The Arundel Mills "creature sighting" was written up in the *Baltimore Sun*. While the article didn't state conclusively that, as the official statement went, the construction workers just glimpsed an errant bear, it was obvious that this wasn't something to take seriously.

Except that Uncle Jerry did. He'd walked into the woods, he said, examined the footprint, and talked to the workers who'd spotted the creature. It wasn't a bear, or a human, or a deformed bear, or a hoax. It was something else entirely.

They walked through the house to get to the backyard, and Owen had to at least glance at his uncle's side of the sun porch. The only noticeable difference was the laptop weighting down the papers on the messy desk. Some of the newspaper clippings on the corkboard were yellowed; they may have been the same ones that were there when he was young.

Owen's mother stopped to talk to her brother Marty while Owen set up their chairs in the shade of a large tree. No one was sitting yet. Guests were still arriving, standing in clusters, lining up at the picnic tables that held stacks of pizza boxes, chips, casseroles, a giant sub, or at another table where his cousin Eric mixed drinks. (Probably, Owen guessed, he was glad to have something to do.) The invitation had specified, "Dress casual – shorts and t-shirts welcome! BYOC (Bring Your Own Chair)." Some of the guests looked uncomfortable, as if they'd feel more at ease with roles more clearly defined, wearing dark suits or dresses and visiting a funeral parlor.

Owen had never actually been to a wake, but from what he knew the typical Irish wake was a whiskey-soaked paradox of celebration and mourning. He hadn't known that his uncle was Irish. Perhaps he wasn't. Either way, Owen liked the idea, and was grateful that it was almost expected of all guests to drink heavily. He needed that. It felt as if the ghost of his fourteen-year-old self was still in the house somewhere,

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kicking a half-deflated soccer ball in the garage or jacking off quietly in the back bedroom.

In the far corner of the yard by the horseshoe pitch, a group of about half a dozen men and a few women stood in a loose circle, food and drinks in hand. One barrel-torsoed man with a red face and a thick blond moustache wore a shirt endorsing Bigfoot For President. These were the people Owen had feared and derided when he was younger: his uncle's cryptozoologist friends. As Owen crossed the yard to get a drink, one of them finished telling a story, and there was a shout of laughter. Owen would've liked to laugh along, or smile, but the ghost of his fourteen-year-old self was watching from the sun porch window, and remembering Halloween.

Owen had told only his best friend Jonah about his mother's all-too-stereotypical Oxycontin problem and his living situation with his aunt and uncle. Jonah was sworn to secrecy, and Owen could trust him. Owen didn't feel so sure about some of the other guys who were in the basement watching movies at Jonah's on Halloween night, who were only casual friends of his. They had watched the original "Halloween" and another slasher flick and were talking when Owen heard the distant doorbell ring.

The boys kept talking but Owen listened only to Mrs. Conway's footsteps crossing the living room. Then, with horror, he heard his uncle's heavy tread. Please don't let him come down here, please don't let him come down here, Owen prayed to whatever god might save teenagers from humiliation, as he said a rushed goodbye and bolted up the stairs.

He had intercepted the adults before they reached the basement door, but what if, now or later, someone did recognize his uncle? Many of the local adults knew the story, so of course their kids knew. And many of them, including many Owen knew, would think it was a great joke to egg "the Bigfoot guy's" house, toilet-paper his trees, and draw idiotic-looking cartoon Sasquatches in their driveway with chalk. It had all happened before. Owen wanted to be on their side: the normal people's side.

Half an hour after he heard his uncle go to bed, Owen snuck out through

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the bedroom window, which was only five feet above the ground. He was only going for a walk, but he wished he could do more. If I knew how to get drugs, he thought, I would. It's possible to do drugs and not get addicted, unlike some people, *mom*.

It was almost 1 a.m., so the two figures he saw walking towards him were the only people he'd seen. "Hey! You!" one of them called. He thought he recognized the voice, and then guessed at both of the figures: Michael Davies and Derrick Watterson, both two years ahead of him in school.

He could smell the mouthwash on their breath eight feet away. They'd been drinking anything mildly alcoholic that they could sneak from their parents' cabinets or buy at a drugstore: vanilla extract, mouthwash, and cough syrup. Both wore masks, one from the movie "Scream," and the other a rubber Frankenstein mask.

"You're whatsisface, from school," Frankenstein said.

"Owen," he said.

"What the fuck are you doing up so late?" said Scream. "It's past bedtime for all the little children, you know."

"Well, what the fuck are *you* doing up so late?"

The aggression in Owen's reply surprised him. He hadn't been meaning to provoke a fight, but he realized he didn't care. In fact, if he ended up with a black eye, a bloody nose, and a concussion, it would probably feel pretty good right then as long as he was able to get a few good punches in. The sensation would at least be something different from the dull anger and shame that had held him in thrall for months.

Scream, who was probably Michael, reached into the pocket of his hoodie and pulled out something white and plastic, with two long ears. A bunny mask. "We'll leave you alone, but first you have to do something."

Frankenstein had cartons of eggs in his backpack. Owen would earn his release by egging a house. Not a good choice, Owen thought, if they

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wanted to make him suffer. He'd been secretly longing to do this for years. It was almost as good as he'd imagined: the thump and crunch, watching the yolk drip elegantly down the house's vinyl siding. They ran when the porch light came on, though it was probably motion activated, and no one appeared. Frankenstein and Scream hunched down in the bushes, chuckling, drunk off the idea that they were drunk.

The pretext of Owen as helpless victim dissolved, and they continued on until all the eggs were gone, as well as all the silly string and toilet paper. The man with the newly decorated maple must have been awake to hear the noise, and chased after them briefly before giving up, yelling curses after them from the sidewalk. They ran a few blocks just for the thrill of pelting along the street, masked in the darkness. When he slowed to a walk with a stitch in his side Owen realized they had more or less made a loop, and were just down the block from his aunt and uncle's house.

He knew he'd been smiling when he felt it melt off his face. Frankenstein and Scream were shambling along ahead of him, rummaging in the backpack. "Now, the grand finale," said Scream theatrically, pulling out a can of spray paint. Owen was glad for the mask that allowed him to conceal his dread. He followed them to his uncle's house.

The two older boys were so involved in their work that they didn't seem to notice or care that Owen hung back. In a spirit of camaraderie, they each did one word. Frankenstein's was "Yeti" and Scream's was "Fucker." To Owen it seemed to take as long as the painting of the Sistine Chapel, and he kept repeating silently, hurry, hurry, hurry. His relief, when they finished, high-fived, and began walking away, was intense. Yet it didn't feel right to Owen that he had just stood there. In his fantasies, he had wished his uncle into a walled weirdos' compound, or conveniently spirited from the face of the earth, many times. If anyone should've done the painting, it was Owen.

"Is there any left?" Owen asked. Scream nodded.

The thing Owen painted was hardly recognizable as a yeti, but as a sloppy, stupid-eyed, hairy blob, it was the perfect summation of his feelings about his uncle. When he was done he walked calmly down the block with the two others, though his synapses were screaming to run.

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Within an hour, he had taken leave of Frankenstein and *Scream* and was back in the house, undetected.

He left for school the next morning before his aunt and uncle had noticed the driveway. On his return, he shut himself up in Brian's room. He knew his aunt had gotten home when he heard, even with his headphones on, the slamming of pots and pans in the kitchen. They started dinner without Jerry, who came in midmeal, ate a few bites of pasta, and then went back outside to clumsily lug the rented pressure washer out of the trunk of his car.

Serves him right, Owen thought hotly. He turned the volume on his Discman up high, to drown out the noise of the machine and the water in the driveway.

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He needed more scotch, though he should've brought his own bottle: it didn't feel right for him to drink what his uncle and aunt had provided. He'd send them a bottle later, he thought guiltily as he headed over to the table. Good stuff. The best.

His cousin Eric, the dark circles under his eyes out of place on his young-looking face, smiled. "Another?"

"Hit me."

"One for you, one for me," Eric said, and reached for the bottle. A crowd settled around them. About eight of Jerry's cryptozoology friends had come to the table en masse and were telling stories about Jerry, this one something about Jerry picking up hitchhikers on the way to a convention in Ohio, and giving them Twizzlers and beer. His uncle had been a warm and generous man, that Owen knew. Everyone did. He could've admitted it to himself at the age of fourteen, he thought with a pang, if he hadn't been such an asshole.

During the next couple of hours, Owen drank heavily and wandered around the yard, having forgettable conversations with relatives he hadn't seen in a while. He was relieved, however, to see that most

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people were getting as drunk as he was.

The darkness, and the ensuing bonfire, seemed to come on suddenly. Aunt Kat was calling for marshmallows, and a few minutes later was toasting one, with the saddest expression Owen had ever seen on the face of someone toasting a marshmallow. The hideous dog was calmer now, and hopped from group to group eating dropped food and melted marshmallow drippings. Needing a break, Owen sat down in someone's chair with his plastic cup of scotch and watched a cryptozoologist couple dance to "Harvest Moon." His mother swayed over, and they both concluded they were too drunk to drive and would wait a while to sober up.

Owen staggered up the back steps towards the bathroom. Between Neil Young on the CD player in the yard and the bright cacophony of several conversations in the living room, the sunroom was dim and quiet. Most of the guests probably knew that this room, of all rooms in the house, was the most invested with Jerry's presence, and intuitively left it alone and solemn for the time being. Maybe later, when people were more drunk, they would sit in Jerry's chair and muse over his collection of oddities.

Owen's eye was drawn to the bottom shelf where "Mysteries of Space and Time" rested. The idea he had made him catch his breath. He could leave a note in volume Y: "I was one of those kids that spray painted 'Yeti fucker' on your driveway." Likely no one would ever find it, but the confession would still be out there. But that, he thought, was cowardly. It was long past time for him to just suck it up and tell Aunt Kat – when she'd had a chance to recover a little. But it didn't feel to Owen like even that would be enough.

He bypassed the living room where several clusters of people, his mother in one of them, stood around or sat on the couch and chairs and floor, talking. His mother was talking with her hands a lot tonight, which was a good sign: she stopped doing it when she was depressed. The floor in the hallway leading to the bedroom and bathrooms still creaked.

Owen had finished peeing and was splashing water on his face, and glanced in the mirror. He looked, as he'd imagined, like shit, but what



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caught his attention was the framed print on the wall behind him. It was a rocky beach with a dense evergreen forest behind it, somewhere in Washington or Oregon, it might've been. The kind of forest that Bigfoot might live in. It was then that the idea began to take form, of how he could attempt to make it right, aside from telling Aunt Kat.

Sammie Caldwell, the owner of the Blackbird Pub, was skeptical. The sketches the kid had given her had nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with her café. She told him that she'd think about it, and took the sketches home with her. As she looked them over the next morning, she admitted that, even though they were – well, Bigfoot – they were good. And they'd definitely be distinctive, a landmark. In the end it was the face that swayed her. The animal was walking through the trees, slightly stooped and swinging its arms, yet the face was human-like. It was melancholy and joyful, looking almost as if it knew some bright secret. Good art, Sammie decided, was always a good investment. She called the guy and hired him for the job.

In the three years since, the Bigfoot mural was tagged only once. Some outraged patrons helped the artist clean it up and repaint. Despite the two benches next to the front door, it was always by the mural on the side of the building where people tended to congregate for cigarette breaks or to wait for cabs. There was a lot of subtle detail, small things that were likely meant to be found by the observant. Sammie emailed these to the artist, when she remembered: suggestions of faces in the leaves, a stump that resembled a three-legged mutt, the house hidden far back in the trees.

The only thing they hadn't noticed, as far as Owen knew, was the dedication. Only two people, himself and his aunt, knew that "for Jerry" was painted into the mural, the tiny letters blending into the bark of a branch high over the creature's head. Only the most diligent of seekers could ever find it, and that was fitting enough, Owen thought as he balanced on the letter with his smallest brush, considering the man to whom the mural was dedicated.

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