



Artist Statement: Making Peace with the Ghosts

Hannah V Warren

ABSTRACT: This statement contextualizes Hannah V Warren’s poetry. Often defined as monstrous and grotesque, Warren’s poetry takes cues from the literature and theory she studies critically. Thus, this statement also situates her poetry within Southern and German Gothic influences while noting comparisons between the two landscapes.

KEYWORDS: Southern Gothic, Deep South, American South, aesthetics, ontography, monster theory, Jennifer S. Cheng, German Gothic, grotesque

The American South

An academic and a poet from a working-class background, I live on the fringes of two cultural spaces. I’m from the rural Deep South in America, a small Mississippi town known for little outside of its fraught history. When I left Mississippi in 2016 after graduating college as a first-generation student, I left everything. The backroads and swamplands held family violence and belief systems that no longer defined me. I didn’t write about the uncomfortable parts of my identity—the trauma based in poverty, abuse, religion, and misogyny—but I held onto that invisible narrative.

It wasn’t until I moved back South in 2019 to attend the University of Georgia’s PhD in English Literature and Creative Writing that I recognized how the cultural and natural landscapes I thought I’d left behind continue to inform my creative and academic preoccupations. I discovered a complicated dis/connection and wrote from this struggle to cleave. I devoted a large portion of my doctoral studies to exploring Gothic aesthetics—aesthetics I grew up steeped in—with a particular focus on literary representations of women as monstrous and grotesque figures. With this move back to the Deep South, for the first time in my creative work, I was determined to explore a new poetic style through the ontographies of *my* Southern Gothic.

I’ve learned through my writing and research that alterity teaches us to believe in distance—an inherent divide existing between *us* and *them*. When we name someone *monstrous*, when we name someone *other*, we’re claiming that only *us* and *those like us* are allowed to identify with common human experiences. Only *us* and *those like us* have known the pain of losing a sibling to cancer or a car crash, the unfiltered joy of seeing the mountains take shape after miles of driving through the prairie, the consuming heartbreak of loving someone who doesn’t love us back, the terror and anticipation of watching a horror film for the first time. All those human moments that make us feel alive and real. The beautiful. The sublime. When we label someone *monstrous*, we strip them of human experiences that form our collective identity,



casting them into the *nonhuman*—a distant category removed from human empathy. We create disconnection.

I'm interested in how we determine what defines *them*—the monstrous *other* opposed to our definitions of selfhood—as well as what defines *we* and *us*. What about a monster makes it a *monster*, and how do we go about solidifying that meaning? My poems wrestle with a learned alterity. So often, women from the American South—and, historically, women everywhere—are labeled *sinners*, *unclean*, *agents of the devil*, *dangerous*. In other words, women are often labeled *monstrous*, and I lean into this unwanted moniker in my poetry as a method of critique when I underscore the ways we embody unwilling disconnection. Even when I intend to write about something else, I find myself circling back to the grotesque, the uncanny, the abject—all these aesthetic categories that solicit disgust.

In writing about monstrous women, I often find I'm writing about myself in some way or another, grappling with my own subjective history. In her essay "Refraction as Rupture," Jennifer S. Cheng claims that "we are always in the presence of ghosts, traces, shadows, echoes," which is to say writing is always haunted by something that came before. As writers, creative and critical, we compose within a lineage singular to our own identities, our devastations and joys, our unique combinations of lived experiences. Whereas I once tried to avoid this tug toward memory, whether abstract or direct, I now embrace it.

Germany's Black Forest

When I lived in Freiburg, in Germany's Black Forest, during 2022 and 2023, I used this space, not as a disconnection from my home in the American South, but as a place to form stronger connections with my own poetic fixations. I compared my familiar landscapes with German Gothic imagery in cathedrals and mossy woodlands. I interviewed women about their experiences with gendered and religious expectations. I sought connections between two homes and found them in unexpected places. I pasted new branches onto my lineage.

What I found was a recognizable story—a traumatized landscape, women fascinated by local old wives' tales, monstrous figures in the forest. I researched local legends and touched ancient carved stones, listened to sermons in ornate Cathedrals, walked uncountable miles through the forests with women who told me about their exuberant love for their homes and their disappointments with local and national government systems. Through it all, I penned comparisons to my own experiences. There were more similarities between our Gothic landscapes, both cultural and natural, than I expected.

Sometimes, it takes a chasm between the self and the home to write about that which is so familiar. In Freudian terms, I needed a defamiliarization, an uncanny separation, to rattle clear my own memories. I wrote most of these poems while living in Germany. Absent the American South once more, I thought about my home space with clear notions of how I wanted to



portray it. The German influence tucks away in small descriptions—the crocuses, the scrolls. Through the lens of the German Gothic, I was able to more thoughtfully describe my dis/connections with Southern Gothic landscapes, both cultural and natural. Borrowing Cheng’s language, after a long avoidance, I’m exploring the shadows, making peace with the ghosts.

Works Cited

Cheng, Jennifer S. “Refraction as Rupture.” *Jacket2*. July 12, 2016.
<https://jacket2.org/commentary/refraction-rupture-0>.



Poems

Dear Girls

Usually : when we write Letters Stone Ceiling
unpainted We speak to the past But We forget We
Neglect To lick our Wounds Golden rapeseed dresses
We whisper Our own ribs into Existence

We use the words *lightning, thimble, ache*

We hope We find our Desires all atremble A wish
or a spell or a Revelation : Our rivering Sucks out
Our Lungs Turns plastic to paper We're tired so
we say What we mean & when we say Our skin is
Paper // We mean it's Peeling away Folding up
into neat little Bloody Scrolls Slivers made from
Space rocks

or some other Galaxy or some other stagnant water

We lyric away Our own names & think Ourselves
Ancient slimdark canyons Or the sharp whistles of
Plastic flyswats

with love & without

Your precious Iridescent
Reflection



O Sister

we cancer away men who fill their wives with sour seed
we touch our head wounds & our fingers come away bloody

how embarrassing—

for others to see our wombs fall apart
our cheekbones bruise so gorgeously

a deer buries its skull in our lover's abdomen
our husbands walk into coal mines
 into bars
 into lakes
 into forests

o lord o kingdom come o flesh of my flesh
o hallelujah grace like rain we slander the resurrection

pastors type our names on prayer lists & form search parties

we lie awake in empty pasturelands
& trace the stars we whisper
 o hallelujah o o o hallelujah

all the crickets join
violin legs chorusing o hallelujah o o o hallelujah



Swamp Stories

witness: an abusive Kentucky man
runs from the law
& the law gives up the chase

he lands with his wife & step-daughters
somewhere in Tennessee
then Louisiana then Mississippi
then his own unmarked grave
—or it's marked & I've never thought to excavate

witness: when an oak crunches upward
spider roots exposed & vulnerable
that means
 at least four people I know are dead

I've lived through so many reckless winds
in wooden houses I've watched god
take my roof
I've listened to tin peel from the rafters
creak & crash & rain
& wet bread on the kitchen linoleum

witness: we don't pull whole trees
from the earth all thrilling erasure
a ribcage open to the sky

our destruction is more complete
more violent in the face of all
that is holy &
beautiful



Dear Speaker of the Poem

We're all Onlookers Ancient Detritus Some
Cathedral's lure : Splintered vibrancy & Cherried mouth
gapes Unadorned cold wall Cold plume Cold
heart Cold gilded gemstone Show me Religion
Deviation Lens of unfamiliar Performance Or
A young bat Smashing The vaulted ceiling

Smear of blood on white marble

See: A thin carved fabric Sweep Protects
Christ's nudity Hangs bloodless Linear Perception of
Critical Imitation A million Biospheres Blending
Shuttlecock Crocuses float Speaker, The wind
Cracks weeds In half Broken ampersands We fall
into the water & Become
Rubberbandsshardssofglasscigarettespigeonfeathers

Warmest regards,

Your own aesthetic shock
Your own electric heart



The Man Who Grew Trees From His Skin

the man who grew trees from his skin
fostered unsolicited ecosystems

he opened membrane pockets
folded in seeds & licked the wounds closed

he kept bonsai trees on his kitchen table
a tiny maple shifting bloodred in fall

a loblolly pine growing tall & ragged
a fiddleleaf crackled with sunburn

two apple trees & two orange trees
the beginnings of a sublime grove

I caressed velvet bark
mouthed the timid growth

abjecting flesh from his flesh
he pruned with a tiny pair of scissors

weekly digging up
something new & miraculous

a gingko sprouted from his arm
& the branches scratched me in bed

angry he tried to pluck it away
silverfish-small leaves fluttered to the carpet

where his cat swatted at them &
ate a few whole

I tugged his hands away from the sapling
you're perfect this is perfect

what a gift—to propagate new life
without shifting & stretching to make room



Insider Knowledge

I live years in the past
& some days a rage grows—
teeth so tight & unseen trouble

when did I last wear perfume
when did I last follow only my body

I've always been so afraid
of something seeding inside me

there's only room for myself
no space between the lines

I move away on a public bench
when a man clears his throat & hums

I don't have kindness today
to speak for the unusual

I admit I admit I admit
I don't have the patience
for deep muffled laughter

striptease a woman calls in english
as her boyfriend swivels his rosemary frame
around a tree

the others goad him on in german
the man on the bench laughs again

a world away all of us spin with life
take small coins & slot them into machines

guttered sound ambient bird distress
soft damage bubbling my intestines

we sometimes never warm up to each other
we sometimes blame ourselves