

Porter
by Eric Cecil

Has made a decision. He must strip his house of its siding. To expose the devils inside, he tells his neighbors, so I can see them before they flee. The old woman says nothing. Her daughter and son-in-law eye him warily. Porter thinks that they, too, could be devils, might be demons that have escaped his home.

Through the window, he gasps. The kitchen.

He kicks away from the shaggy lawn before they can comment. He rushes along the chainlink fence that separates their yards and pushes through the gate, taking special care to close and secure it behind him. The dog bellies against his thigh, elbow, forearm, wrist. No, he says. Down. He swats away her forelegs and strafes the brownblack streak of her flank, runs past the small shelter he fashioned for her some time ago, its roof sloughing away the shingles he stole from the very neighbors he's just left. They didn't understand then. Won't now. Maybe ever.

Every window, he laments. He'd always kept them closed. All but the kitchen that morning, and the bedroom another time besides. Every other window, however, and every day: the house sweltering that summer, the topmost floors stuffy and rank in winter months and fall, but the effort had kept the devils inside until Porter could figure their fate. He did not figure on the bee. Not the violence of its wings between panes, nor the pellet of its body tapping the glass above the sink. An irritant. An evil itself. And yet I can't watch you suffer, he'd said aloud. He'd opened the kitchen window onto the sideyard, the dog suddenly alert and dusting up the sparse lawn, the bee fighting against the net of the screen until Porter had hoisted it upward. And it left.

So did he. To the neighbors'. To tell them of his decision: devils, demons, siding. Walls. There'd been a lady in there once, he explained to them, her constant murmuring and clawing waking him most nights. But she'd left, too, likely drifting through the bedroom window before he'd ever gotten a look. He told the neighbors that he'd unfastened that particular window on a cool spring evening, that he'd fallen asleep to the sawing of crickets outside. And now, he intoned in hoarse whispers, she could be anywhere. Or anyone. He narrowed his eyes. The old woman held her gown to her neck and glared at her daughter, both turning to the son-in-law. Now this.

This will take some time, Porter says to no one in particular. All exits now closed, the house once again secure, he finds the toolchest in a damp and unlit corner of the garage. The dog is barking outside, her paws scrabbling at the shed's exterior. Siding. Windows. Devils and demons. Porter extends his thin arm into the shallow pan of an upper drawer, searching the chest for the cold, forked end of a crowbar, the sere and splintered handle of a hammer. He finds neither. He crawls

his hand past the hollow rings of several sockets until something edges and stings the cushion of his palm.

Sonofabitch. His hand. He falls back and stumbles into the light. There's already a damp lash, already a small dark stain climbing the overlong sleeve of his robe. It wets the knob of his wrist, where a slit begins or ends, its length curling to the inner seam of his middle digit.

He turns, grimaces, doubles over. The dog circles the periphery outside, baying as Porter folds fingers into fist, as he wrings drops of himself onto the earthen floor. The blood inks the surface of a half-buried brick that slabs away from the base of the door. There is no significance in the pattern of its droppings, he tells himself. It is only me. It is only, he thinks, my oil, itself in search of egress. Itself an evil escaping.

He returns to the chest. Its contents rattle as Porter rolls out a lower compartment and finds the hilt of the hammer. He bangs it out of the drawer and drops the anvil of its head into the right pocket of his robe. Into the left, he lowers the horns of the crowbar. Both pockets sag against the meat of his thighs, metal cold and hard on his skin. Skin the house first, he whispers. Tend to self second. Red now rims the lips of his pockets, now muddies the cap of a knee. No matter. The devils inside, Porter says, must be seen. Only then can they be rid of.

And only then does he hear it: the dog pushing off the side of the shed, no longer baying but now barking elsewhere. Maybe nearer the house. Porter coughs and peers through the skein of light rimming the crack in the side door, and he pauses: down the length of the driveway, past the ruts that ladder its mud, he spies a figure stalking the sideyard. The son-in-law. Two other men, taller and wider, follow his lead.

Change of plans, Porter mumbles. The devils are already out. He draws back into the shadow of the corner and kneels beside the toolchest. He lowers the sting of his hand into the right pocket of his robe and knocks his new slit against the splintered handle. He feels the devils of his blood pearl over his fingers. They gallop from the window of his wound, slick his palm, his robe. His hammer. He tightens his grip.

In here, he calls.

The gate rattles. The dog circles and howls.