

THE PECAN TREES

James Ulmer

Michael Levin was an accountant. He found the long columns of numbers comforting, a constant affirmation of a world where everything added up, and he depended on the grounding his job afforded him to keep the inexplicable at bay—a level of distraction, of things glimpsed at the periphery, that threatened constantly to intrude on the sensible world and overwhelm him. His employers at Morgan and Talley, Certified Public Accountants, valued Michael’s dedication, though they had no idea of the desperation that lay behind it. His profession was his lifeline, and for that reason, he approached each task at work with a grim determination.

One October, when the offices were scheduled to be closed for a month of remodeling, Michael was asked if he would be willing to stay on through the renovations. He gratefully accepted, relieved to avoid the threat of an extended leave of absence.

The offices of Morgan and Talley occupied a brown brick building, a former cotton warehouse, on the southeast corner of Loblolly's restored town square, a space with high windows, elaborately carved crown moldings, and pressed tin ceilings. Michael relinquished his sunny view of the square, the shops and cafés, the green shade playing across the sidewalk, for an unfamiliar prospect at the back of the building. He found himself alone in a dusty third floor attic, his desk pushed up against an arched, leaded window, the thick hand-blown glass distorting his view of the hillside, the back parking lot, and the field beyond. As he labored over his calculations, Michael heard beneath him, muffled by the thick wooden floors of the old warehouse, the busy thumping of hammers and the keening of electric saws. The branches of a pecan tree reached into the left edge of his view, close up against the window, and when the sun dropped low enough in the afternoons, the shadows of branches played across the meticulous columns of numbers on his desk. The pecans were just beginning to fall, and a few split green casings littered the walk that led downhill to the parking lot. Beyond, near the edge of the distant field, stood the Osbourne house, its red tin roof overhung by a second old pecan tree.

Michael had read about the place in the local paper. Built in 1868 on land owned by a former slave, the dogtrot house featured an open breezeway that separated the rooms on each side and ran the length of the house from the front steps to the back porch railing. Two fieldstone chimneys, one on each side of the house, rose above the rusted peak of the roof. The city council had voted for funding to restore the farmstead, and the mayor had also secured a grant from the state historical society. According to the paper, the house would serve as a living museum, a fragment of the town's rich past.

One cool October morning, Michael was surprised to see a line of smoke rising from the farmstead's nearest chimney. He went back to his work, but curious, lifted his eyes again from the rows of numbers a few moments later to see a woman emerge from the house. It was difficult to make her out clearly at a distance, especially through the distortions in the glass. If he shifted his head, trying to get a better view, the entire scene rippled insubstantially, as if he were watching through a shallow, flowing stream. Down the front steps the woman came, appearing and disappearing, her form wavering like a blue flame. Looking closer, Michael realized that she was wearing a long, sky-blue dress and, yes, he could see it now, some kind of broad-brimmed straw hat. She glided into the side yard and stopped a few feet away from a bench or

table. On its surface stood four cylindrical domes, pale yellow or gold, each one about two feet high. As Michael watched, his eyes straining for detail, the woman lowered a white gauze veil from the brim of her hat and pulled on a pair of long gloves. She then moved toward the table, and he realized what those rounded cylinders were: *beehives*. The blue form flickered around the table, working busily at the hives, her figure shifting and bending in the flawed glass.

Michael returned to his task, his fingers working the keys of the adding machine with practiced speed. When he glanced up again, he saw the blue shape flow up the steps and disappear into the house.

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From that point on, Michael's attention was divided. He could not have explained why he was so riveted by the activity at the old house, but he couldn't deny his fascination. This, in itself, was not a danger; he felt no threat from the sight of the woman hovering bee-like at her hives or kneeling as she tended her rows of corn and squash. But he knew that anything that distracted him from the rational grounding of his work had the potential to open a door that was better left shut. Michael had had a breakdown in college, a series of terrifying visual and auditory hallucinations that had sent him to the hospital

and knocked his life off course for years. He was thirty-six now, and while there had been no recurrence, he understood that this was only because of his constant focus and vigilance.

Still, when he lifted his eyes from his work, if only for a moment, he couldn't keep himself from scanning the cabin-like house at the edge of the field, waiting for something to happen. Each time, there, across the lot at the edge of the distant pasture, stood the three blank side windows, the rusted tin roof, the axe for chopping kindling driven into a tree stump, the hives droning inaudibly like distant generators. Michael was losing control, and he felt the first sharp stirrings of panic that come with the knowledge of freefall.

But, as a bright Indian summer settled over Loblolly, he continued to watch, and the golden light, the warm smell of the earth and leaves, gradually seemed to calm and center him. One morning, Michael decided to confront his dilemma head on. He would go out for lunch that day, out into the bright, sane sunlight, but first he would find his way to the Osbourne house. The woman in blue, every time he saw her, appeared to be dressed in period clothing. Michael guessed she must be a docent, and that suggested that a tour of the house could be arranged. He would examine the grounds at close range and then walk through the rooms to learn what he could. With familiarity, he

reasoned, the spell would be lifted and his vigil ended. Encouraged, hopeful for the first time in days, Michael Levin worked for the remainder of the morning without once letting his gaze wander to the distant field.

Twelve-thirty found him pulling up on the gravel road in front of the dog-trot house. He turned off the motor, climbed out of the car, took two steps toward the front of the place and stopped.

His eye scanned the scene in front of him in disbelief. There was no bench at the side of the house, no bee hives, no garden in the back. A few fallen pecans lay in the weedy, untended front yard. The house was obviously deserted. Michael felt the sick, familiar panic stealing over him again, the fear that what his eyes had shown him from the attic window couldn't be trusted. He stared at the ground and told himself to *think, think*. After a moment, resolved, he forced himself up the rickety front steps and stood in the mouth of the open passage. The papery cone of a wasp's nest, a big one, hung from the breezeway eaves. The door to his left was unlocked, the wood swollen from the cold and damp. He had to hit it twice with his shoulder, *hard*, before the door sprang open.

He stepped across the threshold.

Inside, the walls were covered with spray-painted graffiti. Daylight spilled in through the dusty window and lay on the worm-eaten planks of the wooden floor. Looking closer, Michael saw that a floorboard in one corner had rotted partly away. Though a white mantle jutted out from the wall facing him, the hearth beneath it had not been reconstructed, and the pile of weathered bricks intended for that purpose were stacked under the window. There were no signs of a recent fire, and indeed, no possibility of a fire, and yet he'd seen smoke rising from the same stone chimney he now saw in front of him.

Without a word, Michael backed out of his room and stumbled shakily down the front steps to his car. He stood by the driver's door, looking back at the ominous, white-washed house. The structure squatted mutely in the autumn sunlight, clearly uninhabited. He could sense, all around him, the dead honeycombed into the walls and absent garden of the old house, and he knew that the bustling farmstead he had watched with growing fascination for the last two weeks did not exist. Michael could think of no rational way to explain this, and he felt his tenuous grasp of the world slipping. A cold dread settled over him. In his mind, he saw the long hall of the psychiatric ward, its gleaming linoleum floors, the orderlies in their white uniforms and silent white shoes.

Slowly, carefully, he drove back to the lot behind his office, his plan for an outing abandoned. He followed the walk strewn with fallen pecans to the front entrance on the square to the glass door with “Morgan and Talley” spelled out in bright gold letters and used his key to let himself in. He went slowly up the stairs, climbing past the sound of saws and hammers, the stairway coated with the chalky dust of freshly cut wallboard, his steps leaving tracks in the dust. At last he stood at his desk, looking down at his ledger with its columns of numbers, his only hope; but as he took his seat, grimly determined to regain control, his eyes travelled for an instant through the thick, hand-blown glass of the window.

In the distance, at the edge of the field, smoke curled from the nearest chimney of the dogtrot house.

If Michael had been standing, he would’ve collapsed in a heap to the floor. He felt cold and faint, lifted helplessly out of himself, and watched through the bent glass as the impossible line of smoke rose in the blue October air. There were the rows of corn behind the house, the trellises of beans and squash, the beehives, the axe handle jutting up from the ragged tree stump. Michael told himself to get up, to move away from that window, but he seemed powerless to respond. He’d read about people who woke in the night to find

themselves caught in a dream, unable to move, and he wondered, with an unexpected spark of hope, if this was what had happened to him. *Am I asleep?* he asked himself. And yet here stood his familiar desk, his ledger, the tended farmstead in the distance in the clear, incontrovertible autumn light.

And then, as he watched, a horse-drawn wagon pulled up in front of the house, and a figure jumped down from the seat. A tall, thin man, dark as a shadow, wearing a scarf wrapped around his neck and a black stove-pipe hat that made him taller still, moved stealthily around the front and side yard, stooping to gather the fallen pecans into a burlap sack, his lean form bent and fractured in the wave of the glass. After a moment, the familiar blue flame appeared on the front steps. Words were exchanged, though Michael couldn't hear them, and then, to his surprise, she aimed a shotgun at the intruder. The man climbed back into his wagon, pointing a thin finger at her accusingly, and drove away.

Michael spent the rest of that day in a bar on the square.

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His time in the bar steadied him, gave him time to think, and Michael came to suspect that what he was seeing through the flawed glass of the attic

window in that old brick warehouse, as unlikely as it seemed, was *not* a hallucination but an echo or reflection of something that had actually happened. He felt that he was meant to see it. But why?

Michael decided he needed to find out more about the Osbourne house. An acquaintance from work gave him the phone number of the president of the county historical society, and at a few minutes after seven on a Tuesday evening, Michael came in from the starry October cold to the warm interior of the same bar that had sheltered him a few days before. A fire burned in the hearth, the red glow painting the mostly empty tables and booths and flickering along the polished curve of the carved wooden bar and its gleaming brass footrest. A lone woman in a back booth regarded him curiously. Michael approached through the maze of tables.

“Are you Grace Ivey?”

She smiled. “You must be Michael Levin.” The woman extended a slim hand, black-nailed, and he shook it. She gestured into the booth across from her. “Have a seat.”

Surprised, Michael slid into the booth. He’d expected some bifocaled librarian speaking in hushed whispers, her gray hair, perhaps, confined in a fraying bun. The woman seated across from him, however, was in her thirties,

her dark hair in a short, feathered cut, a pair of black rectangular glasses framing her quick brown eyes.

The bartender arrived, a burly young man wearing a red Arkansas Razorbacks tee shirt.

He tossed a cocktail napkin in front of her and ceremoniously placed a martini on the napkin. Two olives impaled on a toothpick floated in the icy-looking concoction. She fished out the olives immediately and ate them.

“Olives are marvelous when they’ve been soaking in gin for a while,” she commented. “You should be able to buy them this way in the grocery store, don’t you think?”

The bartender turned to Michael. “Can I get you anything?”

The young man withdrew to mix another drink, and Michael turned to his companion.

“Thanks for agreeing to meet me,” he said.

The fire snapped and flickered in the grate.

“You’re welcome. To tell you the truth, I was intrigued. Not that many people in town are concerned about local history.” She eyed him intently for a moment. “What’s your interest in the Osbourne house?”

“I’ve been watching the place.”

As soon as he said that, Michael wished he hadn't. He saw the surprise flash across Grace Ivey's features.

"What I mean is," he stumbled, trying to rescue himself, "I can see the place from my window at the office. I work across the square at Morgan and Talley. Every time I look up, the house is there. I guess I've become curious."

She nodded. That seemed to satisfy her.

"Well," she began, "there is quite a story attached to that place, both the house and the land. I'm surprised more people haven't heard about it. But then again," she shrugged, "maybe it's *not* so surprising. The story doesn't show the town in a very good light."

Michael's drink arrived. He let the cold gin and vermouth slide down his throat and waited for the glow to warm him. A noisy foursome, two local businessmen and their wives, poured in through the front entrance and claimed a table.

"Tell me," he said.

Grace folded her hands on the table and leaned forward. The fire reflected for a moment on the lenses of her glasses.

“In 1868, a man named Ned Osbourne built the house for himself and his wife, Margaret. But he built it on land that didn’t belong to him. The land had been left to a former slave named Esau Washington. I have a picture of him.”

She took a sheet of paper from a manila folder on the bench beside her purse and pushed it across the table. Michael took it up curiously. It was a copy of an old sepia daguerreotype, a crack running diagonally across the glass plate, but the image was clear. A thin black man, maybe sixty, stared out of the picture: high cheekbones, yellow, jaundiced eyes. He wore a top hat and a black wool scarf wrapped around his neck.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes,” he managed. But his hand holding the paper was shaking. He put it down and took a long, deep drink of his martini. Michael felt light-headed, disoriented. The room seemed to tip and spin for an instant.

“When was this photograph taken?” he wanted to know.

“It couldn’t have been after 1870,” she said. “They hung him in 1870. But I’m getting ahead of myself.”

Michael stared at her and waited for an explanation.

“Ned Osbourne essentially stole that land from Esau Washington. He had the county judge sign the deed over to him. You could do that back then. No

one was going to defend the rights of a black man against a white man, especially since Osbourne was a Confederate veteran. But Esau Washington refused to go quietly away. He kept harassing the family, demanding payment, stealing chickens from the property, raiding the garden. Then, about six months later, Ned Osbourne died.”

One of the wives at the table across the room broke out in hysterical laughter.

“Died how?” Michael asked.

She smiled. “Interesting question.” She drained her drink, caught the bartender’s eye, and pointed to her empty glass. Then she reached again into the folder beside her and slid a Xerox of an old newspaper clipping across the table. Tapping it with the black enamel nail of her index finger, she said, “His obituary says he was ‘taken suddenly by the Lord.’ That could mean anything from a heart attack to pneumonia. Nobody knows. I suppose he might’ve been poisoned. The slaves and ex-slaves in this part of the state, this close to Louisiana, all had access to hoodoo. Old Esau was reputed to be a root doctor.”

Grace’s martini arrived, and Michael nodded in response to the bartender’s question. When his drink arrived, he emptied half of it in a gulp.

“Christ,” he sighed.

She leaned forward, grinning broadly.

“But I haven’t even gotten to the best part yet,” she informed him. “With the husband gone, Washington stepped up his harassment of the widow. He must’ve known how dangerous that was—you know, a black man threatening an undefended white woman in the post-Civil War South? The man was taking his life in his hands. Maybe he was just sick of the whole damn thing, tired of doing nothing. Apparently, though, Margaret Osbourne was no pushover. One day near the end of October in 1870, she caught him gathering pecans from the yard in front of the house. She drove him off with a shotgun.”

Michael felt a cold shock course down his spine.

“A neighbor went to check on her a few days later. There didn’t seem to be anybody around the place. She knocked on the door, the first room to the left of the breezeway, and when no one answered, she pushed it open.”

Michael remembered putting his shoulder to the same door a few days ago. He could feel it in his body, how the swollen wood eventually gave way and the door sprang inward.

“There was blood streaking the walls and pooling on the floor. Margaret’s body sprawled face-down in front of the hearth. Except there wasn’t a face.

Someone had taken an axe to her.” Grace’s eyes got big. “She’d been decapitated. Can you imagine? No one ever found the head.”

“Had Washington done it?”

“Maybe,” Grace shrugged nonchalantly. “That’s certainly what everyone thought, but there never was a trial. Esau headed south into Louisiana, but whether that was because he was guilty or just assumed that he’d be blamed, no one knows. They followed him and brought him back, and they hung him from a pecan tree at the edge of town.”

“They *lynched* him?”

“Sure. The largest mass lynching in the United States happened right down the road in Pine Bluff in 1866. Twenty-four men, women, and children were strung up. The last lynching in Little Rock was in 1927, a man named John Carter, but in small towns like Loblolly it went on well into the nineteen fifties.”

This was not news to Michael Levin. He knew that atrocities of this sort had happened all over the South; but still, hearing it said out loud in such a matter-of-fact manner disturbed him profoundly, made it real somehow.

“When they were done with him,” Grace continued, “they left the body hanging there for a few days as a warning, just long enough for everyone in

town to see it, and then the remains were buried quickly where he'd died. I've tried to find out where that is, to put up a memorial of some kind, but no one seems to know."

To Michael's surprise, she laughed.

"What on earth is funny about that?" he asked.

She drained her glass and leaned forward confidentially.

"Well," she said, "once the old house is restored, the city fathers want to make a restaurant out of it. You know, white tablecloths, candlelight, a wine list. Can you imagine eating dinner in a room where an axe murder took place?" She shook her head, and Michael could feel the anger welling up beneath her sarcasm. "People in this town don't understand a damn thing about their past."

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The following morning found Michael Levin back at his desk, alone in his makeshift office. Though he tried his best to concentrate on the task at hand, to make the numbers come out right, he was continually stealing anxious glances through the thick wave of the hand-blown glass in the leaded attic window.

He didn't have to wait long.

At 10:40 that morning, Michael looked up to see the familiar buckboard pull up in front of the homestead. He watched, riveted, as the thin figure descended from the wagon seat, darkly dressed, the top hat gleaming in the sun, the scarf trailing at his shoulders. He carried a burlap sack in one hand, and Michael thought at first that he'd come to gather pecans; but instead, the man pulled the axe roughly from the tree stump, and Michael felt his entire body go cold from the roots of his hair to his feet. As he watched, the figure climbed the steps to the front of the house, the axe gripped firmly in one hand, the sack in the other, and disappeared into the open mouth of the breezeway. He slipped out of sight past the corner where, as Michael knew, the door to the first room lay hidden.

Several minutes elapsed. Then Michael's eye was drawn by movement at the front of the house. The man came into view and moved deliberately down the steps, grasping his burlap bag. Even at a distance, Michael could see that the sack had something heavy in it. Dark streaks stained the cloth. The figure crossed the yard, climbed onto the wagon seat, and tossed the weighted burlap bag into the back. He picked up the reins, turned the wagon around in the gravel road, and drove off.

For a long time after that, Michael remained stock-still at his desk, staring through the old window, stunned and unseeing. Then he noticed that the table and hives had vanished from the side yard, no cornstalks or rows of beans crowded up against the back rooms, no smoke rose from the chimney. A general air of dilapidation had descended over the dogtrot house, and he knew that if he went there now he would find only the graffiti-strewn walls and dusty windows, the smell of old wood and mildew in the rooms, the wasps crawling over their paper mansions.

It was over.

Michael knew how the story ended—the pursuit to Louisiana and the swindled man, the murderer, hanging from the branch of a pecan tree, his corpse burned and bloodied.

He returned to his work with a renewed sense of purpose, determined to catch up. Not once, for the remainder of that afternoon, was he tempted to look through the attic window, and, indeed, he was convinced now that he would see nothing further if he did.

When he emerged from the building sometime after five, Michael was shocked at the change in the weather. That morning, when he'd gone inside, the temperature had been nearly eighty degrees, as balmy as a day in mid-

September, but now, standing at the crest of the path that wound downhill to the nearly deserted parking lot, Michael felt an icy wind slicing through his shirt. Winter had arrived, suddenly, as it sometimes did in this part of the South, sweeping down unobstructed from Canada to settle into the pines. In the west, the sun was sinking into a bank of dark cobalt clouds, and the last light stained the tops of the wind-stripped trees for as far as he could see with an unearthly red light. Wind tore through the branches, rattling the few remaining leaves still clinging to the boughs and lifting a few from the grass to send them tumbling and spinning giddily toward the paved lot.

Shivering, Michael came around a bend in the path and stopped.

There, just to his left, among the split casings and shells beneath the enormous pecan tree that reached to the attic window, stood a figure Michael knew—the face in profile under the shabby top hat, the scarf and long, dark coat, muddy boots, hands tied behind his back. Michael waited for the form to resolve itself into shadow, a trick of the light in the eerie red dusk. But the shape of Esau Washington remained stubbornly before him for ten long seconds, twenty, as real as anything around him in the bleak wintry landscape. Then the head turned, and yellow eyes stared back at Michael out of the dark, lined face—a look of barely restrained grief and fury that froze him to the spot.

In his mind, with horrid clarity, Michael saw the body hanging in the branches, swaying slightly among the unfallen pecans, and caught the nauseating odor of burned flesh and decay. Three crows—and as he watched, a fourth landed—called out from the top branches, exulting over the feast. The next instant the eyes turned away again and the picture vanished, snapped out like a flame when the fuel is withdrawn, and Michael found himself looking at the forlorn, isolated figure in profile forty feet away across the grass.

Released, Michael hurried gratefully downhill to his car, the only one left in the lot, and when he finally slid behind the wheel and locked the door, heart pounding, he glanced back. At first, Michael thought the figure stood on the hillside, staring back at him. But then he realized this wasn't so. He followed the dead man's gaze past the lot to the edge of the field, to the dogtrot house across the gravel road, its red tin roof and twin fieldstone chimneys. It was the last thing the old man had seen, a final insult before they'd pulled the rope tight and hoisted him, struggling, from his feet.

Driving home, Michael decided he would call Grace Ivey and tell her where Esau Washington's body was buried, and perhaps he would tell her how he knew.

James Ulmer's collection of ghost stories, *The Fire Doll*, published in 2017, was awarded the George Garrett Fiction Prize from Texas Review Press. A previous collection, *The Secret Life*, was published by Halcyon Press in 2012. Ulmer's poetry and fiction have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The North American Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *New Letters*, *The Antioch Review*, and elsewhere. He is currently Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Southern Arkansas University.