

The Death of H. G. Wells

They were a group of nuns, it looked like. And a man in a black robe leading them in song. Gwyneth snorted and turned from the window. Bertie had written an article denouncing the Catholic Church for holding back the freedom and dignity of the human species, and now these people were out there proving his very point!

Earlier he had asked that she go have a talk with them, having been a nun herself in another life, but Gwyneth refused. He should have known that she wanted nothing to do with such people. Let them bluster and ballyhoo all they want.

Her intransigence had definitely put Bertie out of sorts, even more so than usual. He was to have a meeting with someone important and he wanted his hair cut, even though she had cut it just last week. Wanting a haircut meant he was frantzy.

He called to her again.

"Coming!" she said.

She grabbed up the scissors and lumbered down the hallway.

The sun fixed diamonds on the glassed-in bookcase. Bertie sat with his back to the window overlooking Regent's and the Thames beyond. He grimaced and fussed his fingers over the few hairs on his lunar head. Gwyneth sighed. The man was impossible when he was in one of his pets.

"Sit yourself up then, you naughty boykins," Gwyneth said. She snapped the sheet and tucked it around the great man's shoulders. "Come. Lean back. There you go, love."

A chant arose from outside. And then a thud. Someone was beating a drum! Scowling, Gwyneth set down the scissors and stomped to the front porch.

"No one wants it!" she yelled.

The crowd settled into silence. A viridescent statue, standing in the square across the avenue, thrust a sword at panicked clouds. Black crows wheeled. Broadsheets littered the shining cobbles. Gwyneth shook her fist and then went inside again.

"Pfui!"

She took up the scissors.

"Just off your ears again?"

Bertie said nothing.

"Now, stay still. Right! It will all be over in a moment."

Thuds pulsed, rose. Dreadful singing...

She restrained herself from pointing out to him how she had cut his hair of Monday last; she also did not mention how considerably fagged she was feeling. Would he even care? Her hand trembled as she clicked and snipped. Fine blonde hairs floated to the sheet. Bits of straw. Days of sweeping at the convent. Oh, yes, she remembered... She clicked her teeth. The police were just a telephone call away. She'd ring them as soon as she finished with the hair.

The hair! But also the soup. And the floors.

The floors looked like hard soup, in fact.

Her eye caught a glimpse of his papers. Ants, ants, ants. All of yesterday, and the day before, she had exhausted herself by typing up his latest novella and sending it off to the London broadsheets. The man had no real appreciation of how hard she worked: days she cleaned and fed him; nights she toiled over the typewriter trying to bring coherence to his scrawling ants. And what did she get in return? Abuse. Threats. Insults...

A convulsion went through her: the scissor pricked his neck.

Bertie howled.

"Oh! Sorry, sorry, love. But just hold still, please..."

A week ago Bertie had lost his temper and fired the housekeeper, and then the cook. It was left to Gwyneth, and that horrible old toad Mrs. Healey, to do all the rough work. Things could not continue as they were for much longer. The year previous, as the war was winding down, they had been lucky to find anyone at all. Now there was no one. The house, so grand and drafty, projected a queer melancholy. Even the full-size team of Tang Dynasty horses, a gift from General Chiang Kai-shek, appeared a bit forlorn, their stone eyes wise with rue as Gwyneth rushed on her way to some fresh disaster of household management.

"There's the rain again, Bertie," Gwyneth said. "Do you hear it?"

Over the horrid singing, that is. Not even the wet was driving those people away.

She tried to concentrate. She observed how tremendously fast his hair grew. In just a few days' time it licked the rims of his ears again. All that brain activity, no doubt. Sometimes she swore she could see the energy radiating off him. She would have been quite content to stand near and warm her hands as if by golden brain fire.

"I so love the sound of the rain, don't you? Shall we have Mrs. Healey start a fire?"

Bertie said nothing.

So who was this important visitor? Her stomach lurched when she thought about who it could be. Bertie would not divulge the person's identity, but he made it plain that the entire house needed to be spic and span from rooftop to root cellar. Early that morning, frustrated with Mrs. Healey, Gwyneth had taken it upon herself to mop the hallways and kitchen floors. As the sun rose through the silvered panes, fiery suds went spinning across the parquet. One edge of the parquet was broken. It looked as if a creature from the basement, invented in one of Bertie's fictions, had taken a massive bite of the floor.

Dloomp. dloomp. dloomp. came the systolic sound of rugs being beaten in the cellar. At last Mrs. Healey was doing something!

Or was it the holy drums outside?

Her teeth clattered.

Everything indeed needed a proper airing out. Airing, airing! A great spiraling whoosh of air in all God's creation...

The worst of it was the front parlor, the dim dusty chamber jumbled with all manner of knick-knackery. Bertie referred to it in jest as "Le Museum." Standing guard was a deep-sea diver suit, complete with brass fixtures and gridded faceplate. On the walls hung oils of Bertie, portraits and full-length, along with velvet-framed pictures of prime ministers and fellow philosophers and scientists. A prized possession was a letter from Jules Verne himself, framed under glass and written in tangled curlicues, formally naming Bertie as his literary heir. In a corner, elevated on pseudopods, was an alien spacecraft with blood bubble eyes. So many times she had asked to have the thing removed into storage, but Bertie would not hear of it. He seemed

to enjoy the fantastic clutter. Shelves were crowded with replica time machines and a Morlock (horrid thing!) fashioned by an admirer out of charred gutta-percha. And so many other objects: a hydrometer, astrolabe, race-calipers, clepsydra, Leyden jar, shells from the Indian ocean, glass figurines from Istanbul, a leopard's paw from darkest Africa, a stuffed cormorant, necklaces, scarabs in amber, feathers, pens, notched bones, volcanic rock... In the furthest corner sat a waxen blue-purplish-black creature, mouth a rictus, bulged eyes closed and tiny arms crossed like a pharisaic homunculus. Bertie told visitors it was a lemur or chimp fetus of some sort, but Gwyneth knew what it really was, what it *had* to be. Whenever she dusted its precious little nose and eyes, she would weep a little--but surreptitiously, since Bertie would lose his temper if he saw her "being a woman."

And what dust! Motes danced cotillions in the light, as if in mockery. How many times did she have to tell Mrs. Healey to clean the parlor? But the feckless old quilber was a mass of fear and superstition. She left it to Gwyneth, as usual, to do everything herself. So, after nearly breaking her back mopping, Gwyneth had been obligated to sally into the parlor armed with a feather wand, jabbing and stabbing. A Greek amphora had tipped, tottered, and shattered on the hard soup. Gwyneth cried out, which she immediately stifled. Rasping, red-faced, she deposited the fragments into the front pocket of her apron. She would deal with it later. His portrait looked on with eyes freshly dusted and brightly chthonic.

The rest of the early morning hours had been spent rushing from one crisis to the next. Oh! Everything was just filthy as sin! How long had it been since Mrs. Healey set a rag to anything? On top of it all, Gwyneth had to get the tea service ready.

But who was this visitor? Gwyneth paused to wonder. Was it Lord Churchill? Perhaps it was even His Royal Majesty Himself! Could a person even imagine it? Someone like Gwyneth in the same room as His Highness! Not that Gwyneth didn't have her own pride. She had attended Oxford and once upon a time made a fair career of her own in *belles-lettres*. Still, she was just a working class girl from Brixton... And yet wasn't Bertie working class also? Yes, though he detested talking about his days as a draper's apprentice, it was true. He hated talking about the past in general. She shivered. If people only knew their secret! How they had been lovers, how she had been everything to him while he went through his first divorce before another secret--and yet *another*--ruined all. But they were together again now. Reunited after decades apart. A syllogism worthy of Aristotle. To cherish and to love each other in the twilight of their lives, victorious over the attritive algebraic of Time itself. Yes, if only His Majesty knew the full entire story, it would be the banner headline for weeks in all the dailies.

LOVERS LOVE AGAIN, PROVE LOVE REAL!!!

But wouldn't such a scandal bring down the government, the whole house of Windsor?

And if England fell, what of the other democracies?

Darkness.

Grunts woke her from her reverie. Scissors in hand, Gwyneth orbited the great man sitting hunched under the sheet. She squinted at his sideburns, making sure they were even. His eyes, gray and oceanic, refused to meet hers.

"I'll be getting the flowers later, don't you worry, Bertie," Gwyneth said. "Marigolds are in season now. Or should we just go with the roses?"

Bertie said nothing.

Because of the weather her joints were flaring, but she knew better than to complain of it. She only hoped she could get a quick sit-down before the esteemed company arrived. Was it Lord Baron Bolingbroke Brookings? Princess Farthwode Dunforth...?

"Hold still, dearie, we're almost done."

Something in her apron clacked. She had forgotten the shattered amphora. She frantically readied excuses as to why she had pieces of it clanking around in her uterus; but Bertie seemed not to hear, or care. No, his mind was focused on the present and future of humankind, not the dusty past of her insides.

"Just a little off the top," Gwyneth sang, snipping scissors. "You're looking extra smart today, Bertie, I must say."

Gwyneth noticed something from the corner of her eye. It was Bertie's macintosh, draped over the back of one of the Queen Anne chairs. How many times had she told him to hand over his things to her or Mrs. Healey when he returned from his constitutionals? But Bertie did just as he pleased, dropping things right and left, losing his papers, shedding tobacco from his pouch. All that was well and good when there was a proper maid employed, but the man seemed to forget who it was picking up after him.

Dloomp. dloomp. dloomp.

"Bertie? I'm making a potato soup. Will you at least tell me now who is coming to visit? Mrs. Healey got a mutton and some clams, and of course we have the good sherry. Can't you tell me? I don't even know if I'm dressed properly!"

Bertie said nothing.

Nearly blind with frustration, Gwyneth leaned forward and crooned, "Oh, Bertie... Tell me. It's not... His Royal...?"

Bertie cried out. The point of the scissor had nicked his temple.

Oh! She was terribly, terribly sorry. Bertie let fly a volley of terrific oaths and curses. There was blood, but not much. Gwyneth rummaged in her apron and whipped out a cambric. One of the shards also tumbled out; she kicked it under the sofa. As she patted his head, she noticed too late that the cloth was dirty. A black comet streaked across the parchment of his skull. As Gwyneth tried to wipe him clean, he slapped back at her.

"Oh! Bertie, please! Just let me... Bertie! Right. I'll get the tonic and then we'll be finished. Okay? I'll get you the tonic, dearie."

It was Bertie's favorite part of the haircut. Gwyneth shook up the bottle of Lieutenant Whortle's Hair Tonic (no other tonic would do), and liberally poured it over Bertie's head. The clear scented oil spread like sheltering wings. Smiling, Gwyneth worked her chrolky fingers into the eggwhite flesh, flowers of jasmine curling to her nostrils... Even Bertie seemed to relax, his shoulders eroding and hand slipping from his violated head. Gwyneth contemplated the dimensions of the cranium under her fingers. It was truly a wonder that such a compact vessel contained so many profound philosophies. And here she was touching the very primal source!

"There, all done."

She untied the sheet and gathered up the few trimmings. It was her secret, but she kept all of Bertie's hairs in mason jars down in the root cellar. Perhaps science would one day want to know more about the hairs, their unique biochemical composition.

Gwyneth took a final swipe at the skull smudge. But Bertie parried, waved.

"Right! Do you want your tea early? Or shall you be wanting your nap? There's still some time, I believe."

Bertie stepped with giant gravity to the secretary. There he sat down and started to write, his pen scratching across paper: ants marching, multiplying... Gwyneth beheld the sight beteared. There had been a gloomy period where Bertie had not written a solitary thing. Some of it was due to depression over the world situation, over humanity's baffling love affair with death. But it was also caused, in truth, by a shock he'd suffered after submitting a piece about crypto-Bolshevism and the Catholic Church to his friend Horace Stafford at the *Standard*. The work was not only not accepted for publication, but Bertie received a terse postcard informing him that Mr. Stafford had perished in a V-2 rocket attack, almost full two years previous. It was a heavy blow. Day and night Gwyneth had to talk with Bertie in order to maintain his spirits and keep him doing what the world so desperately needed him to do: write. People needed guidance in such parlous times--and who better to deliver it than the one and only H. G.? A man who had conversed with Albert Einstein and Mahatma Gandhi about the global conundrum; who had predicted the horrors of the twentieth century; and who was now needed to penetrate further and further into Time, into the remaining half-century certainly fraught with ever-increasing dangers!... But he complained of feeling old. All his friends, or at least many of them, were either dead or nearly so. Sydney Webb, George Gissing, Lady Frances Warwick, Frank

Swinerton, Countess von Arnim... All gone and dead like ghosts in a dream. And here he was submitting a polemic to a man who had long since been swept off the stage by rocket fire! He was that worst kind of fool: an old one. No, the jig was up. It was time to bow out. But first he sacked the housekeeper and cook. His ugly humor nearly forced Gwyneth herself to depart. His tirades were vulgar, childish, unliterary. She hung on only because of what they had once had or what they still, perhaps, had.

She felt a ferny impulse to kiss the folds of his neck. But Bertie was smoking, writing. It was not a good idea to disturb him. Instead she pressed the blood-and-dust-stained cambric to her mouth, and inhaled.

Boaaionwng! Gklingoaong!

Gwyneth jumped. "That must be our guest! Dear me, they're early. Mrs. Healey! Where is that creature?"

She tore off her apron, tossed the clatter in a closet, and paused in the hallway mirror to pat her white hair and brush down her bombazine dress. The horses bared their teeth.

Gwyneth swung open the door--

"Oh!"

She could not hide her dismay. This was not the King, nor the prime minister, nor anybody famous she could recognize. It was merely a young lady wearing a collapsed-cake under a white-and-pink feather. Beyond the iron palisade congregated the dark crowd, mute and watching. Sunlight waxed and waned; rising mist curled off the sword.

"Who are you?"

The lady smiled. She held out her gloved hand. "Miss Cornwallis. Charmed."

Gwyneth stared, mouth slabberjacked.

The hand died. "I have an appointment today with Mr. Wells...?"

Gwyneth did not move.

"Ah, um. May I come in?"

Gwyneth jerked to life. "Yes, yes, of course. Miss Corewells, yes? And you work in the government...? I'm sorry, Bertie-- Mr. Wells told me nothing."

Miss Cornwallis let out a thin, pippy laugh. "Not with the government, gracious no! I edit a daily journal, perhaps you've heard of it? *The Workmans' Alliance*?"

"Do come in, please. You like potato soup?"

In the foyer, Miss Cornwallis appeared rather granular and ghastly: she had a queer adiurnal face with doilies dotting her cheeks, and her rabbit teeth were not altogether white.

"What a lovely home," said Miss Cornwallis.

"Yes, it's grand, isn't it? Those are Chinese horses!"

"Ah!"

"Let me take your things. Is it still raining out?"

Miss Cornwallis handed her cake and coat to Gwyneth and then, without so much as a by-your-leave, made a beeline for the front parlor! Gwyneth hastily hung the things, fuming about Mrs. Healey all the while. Where was that awful woman? It was her job to receive the guests. Did Gwyneth have to do everything?

Out of breath, she reached the parlor in time to see Bertie stretching out his mouth over the hand of this strange lady, this nobody. *Miss Miniver Crowells. A nothing no name nobody.* But Bertie, hunched and humped, received the lady as if she were Her Majesty the Queen

Herself. Oh, and when had Bertie ever freely given Gwyneth a kiss? Her heart pounded; she felt the *dloomp. dloomp. dloomp.* down to her ankles. And then back up to her head.

Gwyneth hobbled forward. Nearly in a swoon, she clutched a flying saucer fin.

"A chill in here, I'm afraid," she croaked in a loud voice. The grainy rain moaned *Dies Irae*. "I'm dreadfully sorry Mrs. Healey didn't start a fire. I didn't think we would be entertaining in here. In here, Bertie, are you sure? Shall I...?"

They were not listening. Sitting on the divan and leaning like donkeys at a corn basket, their heads nearly touched as they murmured to each other.

Click click click.

The Workman's Alliance.

Of course. All that rot. Gwyneth made no bones about preferring Bertie's novels and stories, but his political writings were surely important as well. They were rightly concerned with saving the world. Nearly every night poor Bertie woke with an farcineous shout, convinced death was raining down giant black V's, that air raid sirens wailed as civilization convulsed and ended in awful agony, all because no one would listen.

No one would...

"Right! Anyone fancy a bit of potato soup?"

Scalp aglow, Bertie chuckled and was motioning with his stick at either the deep-sea diver or Gwyneth herself (*was he saying her name?*) when she noticed that something crept along his shoulder. It looked like a monkey's clawed hand! Gwyneth cried out.

"*Our baby!*"

"Are you all right?" said Miss Cornwallis.

"Oh, it's nothing," Gwyneth said. She blinked. "Excuse me."

Just dust. Or chimney ashes. Still, it quite ruined the effect of his clean, formal dress. Spots like ants in nun habits. Whoever this Miss Goreuberallis was, what would she think? Gwyneth, clucking, devised a stratagem.

"Right, and Bertie," she said, "let us give you a hug. Don't be shy, dearie! You give out kisses, but not to me...! Come here, darling!"

She chased him around the parlor. It wasn't until she had him pressed against his portrait, both pairs of eyes flaring with high fury, that she got her arms around him--and flicked away the feathery filaments.

"There! I would kiss you, too, but I know you don't like such *balderdash*."

Gwyneth cast a withering glance at Miss Cornwallis. The woman sat on the edge of the divan. Quite calm, she scratched her upper lip near that hideous mole.

Well! Gwyneth hastily curtsied to the room (out of the corner of her eye she saw the pair of scissors on the shelf near the baby; *how did they get there?*) and dashed out.

In the kitchen she busied herself wondering where that Mrs. Healey was. Oh! She'd kill the miserable wretch with her own hands if she could!

"Mrs. Healey," she roared. "Come here this instant! I need you to help with the mince sandwiches. *MRS. HEALEY!*"

The pot was boiling. Gwyneth couldn't stop thinking about the scratch. What did it mean? A signal for Bertie? An MI6 secret code...?

What made her most angry was recalling her past history with Bertie. The secrecy he had once sworn her to. The government secrets, the international networks... But how long could she harbor the stone in her belly, in her head?

Jaw knit, Gwyneth arranged and re-arranged the sandwich triangles as if struggling with an intractable geometry problem. Then she paused to have a taste of the soup. It needed cream, maybe more salt. Perhaps she could cook a message into it somehow...

A walrus boom of laughter. An answering flute.

Treading over the creaksome parquet, Gwyneth went and stood by the parlor doors. She gently pushed on the left-hand door. Through the crack she saw Miss Cornwallis, rabbit teeth flashing; Bertie grinned like a besotted schoolboy. What could they possibly be finding so droll? But it was not for Gwyneth to understand, as Bertie had said to her so often.

Dloomp. dloomp. dloomp.

Certainly that wasn't Mrs. Healey still working on...?

Just then Bertie blazed his eyes at her! In a panic, Gwyneth stumbled back and fell into the horses, nearly tumbling the whole team; grabbing a snout she regained her balance. Then she retreated to the kitchen. If Bertie asked about her snooping, she would say she was worried that something terrible was happening, because who was this strange lady, this Miss Cornjellies?

Perhaps she was an anarchist. A freemason.

An anti-hebdomist...

Burning, trembling, Gwyneth thought it was high time this person, whoever she was, knew the full story, the story of who had *really* written Bertie's best work. That's right, that's right. The terrible secret would come out! It was *she*, the person who was being treated so

wretchedly. It was *she* who'd written *Invisible Man* and *War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* and all the others. The man had no shame back then. He would filch all her best ants--and then sold them as his own creation! But what could she have done? She was just a poor foundling, with no connections, fresh out of St. Cecilia's. And then there was the matter of her condition. Bertie calculated all this, of course, which explained his brazen conduct. He was able to take advantage, take everything, as was his wont. Oh, but that should have been *she* whose name blazed in glory across all those books. It should have been *she* whom Miss Cordyell fawned so horridly over. It was *she*. It was *she*.

The soup was ready. Skeins of steam dewed the hanging copper pots and Greek drama masks. She ladled the liquid into porcelain bowls. Once she had loaded everything on a gadrooned tray, she entered the parlor. She assumed a cheery demeanor.

"I hope you fancy a potato soup! I--! Oh...!"

Bertie was dead on the floor. Corners of her mouth red, Miss Cornwallis straightened over the body. She smiled awkwardly.

"I must be off, I'm afraid."

Gwyneth dropped the tray. Soup exploded.

"No, no, no, no. Bertie? *Bertie!*"

"A fainting fit. Passed out, I believe."

"Bertie! Bertie!"

The door slammed. *Dloomp!*

"Wait, oh, wait!"

Gwyneth rushed out after Miss Cornwallis. She grabbed the woman's arm.

"You'll at least publish his work? His essays...?"

The woman stared at Gwyneth a moment. Her lip curled. "We've no space just at present. Perhaps next month."

"It may be too late by then! Humankind...!"

"I must go. Will you unhand me, please?"

"But surely there's a mistake, or...?"

"Please, if you will..."

A howl went up: a swooning spectral chill made corporeal. Gwyneth disclutched Miss Cornwallis and plodded in a sweat back to the parlor.

"Bertie? Bertie, dearie...!"

Gasping, eyes rolling, he lay at the feet of the diver.

"Bertie! Bertie, please!"

Brass spots swam on his white face. She fell by his side.

"BERTIE!!"

Then she noticed his open trouser fly. Her breath caught.

Miss Cornwallis half-stood in the doorway.

"Shall I ring for the ambulance?"

Eyes breaching, Gwyneth turned. *Hand kissed. Laughing. Fly open.* It was too, too plain! She cannonshot herself at Miss Cornwallis.

"What--!"

Both ladies slammed to the floor. Miss Cornwallis kicked and slapped and squirmed. She clambered for the door when Gwyneth grabbed her from behind. They fell over a pseudopod, the saucer collapsing and coughing clouds of dust.

"Get off me! Help!"

"You did it! You did it!"

Miss Cornwallis was flung against a portrait, knocking it from the wall. They tripped over the corpulent body. Furniture broke; objects crashed. Gwyneth grabbed up the scissor and, screaming the Lord's prayer, slammed it into Miss Cornwallis, into the cormorant neck. The blade stuck. Bright dark metal sprung forth.

Quiet, she swung the scissor again. And again.

Miss Cornwallis waved at her throat. Blood gorgled from her tongue. Her eyes rolled white as she shrunk. Her hard shoes kicked. *Cackity-cack!*

Silence.

The clock ticked.

Blood spread and zagged, infused the soup.

Panting, Gwyneth crawled over to Bertie. Like a stray hair, a piece of skin peeped out from the uncloistered trouser. How many times had she told him to behave? To be *good*? But he never listened. He just took her ideas, her youth, her soul--sucking her entirely dry... She looked up. The fetus child stared down from the shelf. Its face puckered with amusement.

"Sorry, love," Gwyneth whispered.

She snipped the peeping piece. Blood rose, darkened the gold filigreed vest. The thing, limp and pale, wept. Mother Superior had been right. Years ago she had been told the story of a

grasshopper landing on a saint. And the insect was the male organ, or so was the understanding of the girls in the convent. The point of the fable was lost on Gwyneth except that the thing was evil. She remembered the priest's face. The guttering candlelight. *Introit ad altar dei*. In secret she had started writing letters to Bertie. Was it true that the thing was evil? His letters answered her back, a miracle, unlike the letters she mailed to God. He came to see her to prove the truth of his words. And, no, the thing was not evil.

Not...?

Oh, what had she done? What had she done?

The thing cried all over her hand.

DLOOMP! DLOOMP! DLOOOMP!

Mrs. Healey! Gwyneth held her breath. The sound was actually heavy feet: the old woman was coming up the stairs at last. No doubt Mrs. Healey, even in her deafness, had heard the shrieks and commotion.

With the thing squished tight in her fist, Gwyneth grabbed the baby and some papers, and ran to the front. Outside, obscured by censer smoke, stood the nuns. Their faces were black, as if covered in sacrophange. They were advancing. The intoning priest led them on. Sword high.

Gwyneth fell back. They had heard that Bertie was dead! How did they know? Mrs. Healy. It must have been Mrs. Healy!

The horses, the time machines, the knick-knackers... And the bodies soaked in blood. No, she had no choice. She could not stay any longer. Tying on her bonnet, she took up the baby again and opened the door.

Just then something squirmed in her arms. A coiled muscle writhing. The baby had opened its eyes and SCREAMED.

"She's the one!" someone cried. "It's her!"

Needles of fetus blood splashed her face.

"It's her...!"

Coughing, choking, she pushed through the enraged eyeless bodies.

"Give way. I'm nobody! No one! *Please...*!"

Teeth snapped and bit. She was just getting free when a shout went up and she was crushed on all sides. Swinging her stained fist and cradling her baby, she finally fell under. Feet kicked. Her body rolled amid the murderous fevered chiaroscuro. Fingers broke, tangled in curlicues, and brown waters frothed at the teeth of a grate, under a sky mangled with horror.