

The Hands of Shorleigh Woods

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Part 1

What could be said of the annihilation of the woods called Shorleigh Woods, situated in the North Devon countryside a short distance from the Tor River, could do little to articulate the horror and the grief of its murder. To those who had loved the woods that had been home to many animals of the ground and air, as well as habitat for bluebells, garlic, oak, redwoods, and had held within its body a glorious ancient badger sett, was the carnage of a war zone, genocidal in its oblivion. Barren absence filled the space where there had been living presence. Where there'd been an orchestra of wild song, silence was what could be heard. The devastation was truly unspeakable, with all words failing to convey the horror.

The felling of trees in the woods had happened with locals believing that this was limited to those ash trees that had the disease dieback, and those other ash trees close to them, to lessen the spread of illness — a sad but understandable situation. But this is not what had happened. The felling had not been limited in this way. The felling had not been done to attend to that disease. The annihilation had been totalising. A haunted terrain left where it stood, terrible to behold. The ghosts of the woods and all those a part of it, with the coldness of death, clung to the space.

Folks who walked or drove along the road that used to be darkened by the tree cover now bore witness to the devastation. Those who walked through the woods or lived there now carried a wound, agonising and terrible.

Part 2

In a field that was close to where the edge of Shorleigh Woods and the ancient and active badger sett had been, a crow landed and looked at the strange scene that was happening before their eyes. From the air they had watched a young deer approaching the area where the ancient badger sett had been and put their nose close to the ground. Curiosity had inspired the crow to land for a closer look. But no sooner than when they landed the fawn ran off, as if someone had startled them. At first the crow was confused as to what had alarmed the youngster. It could not have been the crow that had scared them, as the fawn was not so young as to still be frightened by birds who they could easily chase away. There had been no loud noises or any other animals that the crow had seen. But moments later they saw the monstrous and grotesque sight that had inspired the fawn to run away. From where the badger sett had been, all manner of hands emerging from the ruined ground.

At first these dirt covered hands appeared to be those of buried humans, for they were of the look of human hands, with all the fingers and thumbs that are the norm for humans. But it didn't take long for it to be plain that this was not the case and that these were not human hands. The hands that emerged from the earth before the crow's eyes were not attached to any human body, moving independently in a manner akin to that of spiders. They crawled out from the ground as a sickeningly foul sight, like vile witchcraft. As more and more arose, the crow became more and more horrified by their presence, and took flight to keep away from the hands.

From the air, the crow watched them continue to emerge from the ground, like spiders or ants, with fingers moving like legs and the hands clambering over each other in their desperation to move. When the crow had landed on one of the few remaining trees in the area, they spotted that the hands were moving in all directions and not just one way, suggesting that there was

not one single purpose for their arrival. Where they were going or what they would do when they got there was mysteries that the crow could not say with certainty. Instinct suggested to the crow that there was a definite connection to the annihilation of the woods and the arrival of these revolting hands. Perhaps they went to seek out revenge for the decimation that lay before them, or to wait in other woods close by and attack anyone who would do harm, or something else entirely, cruel and terrible. All things were possible and no answers could be given. It was impossible to ask them, as hands have no mouths to speak answers to the question “what is it that you are doing?”. So the crow watched.

After a long period, so long that the evening had turned to night and shadows were now cast by the cool dark light of the moon and stars, long after the first hands had pulled themselves out from the ground, covered in dirt and filth, the last hand crawled off towards an unknowable destination. Those hands born of a wretched birth out of the earth, from the unspeakable catastrophic annihilation, were now so far spread out and out of sight that the crow had no way of telling where they were — and it was not long before this final hand disappeared from sight and into the shadows. After a brief moment of investigation, the crow went off from this scene in flight, crying out for days for all to hear what they had seen emerge from the ground.

Part 3

Many days later, in woods a short distance away from where the hands had crawled out from and from where Shorleigh woods had been, the crow spotted someone walking through the trees. This person, who had been seen walking through Shorleigh woods by those who lived there on a great many occasions, came up to where there was a moss covered tree trunk that had fallen in the wind, a couple of metres away from the stream that ran between the trees, and began to write. Now writing held no value for the crow and seemed a most stupid of activities to engage in. More than this though, a terrible fear surged through the crow, longing to be expressed, for one or any number of those hands might have made their way to these woods, and might try to strangle this writer, or enact a great many other possible violent acts. The crow, having no desire to see this writer killed by those revolting creatures, cried out for the writer to stand up and walk on, cawing and cawing repeatedly to no avail, unable to see if any hands were waiting to strike. They could be anywhere, but the writer did not seem listen to the crow, who feared attempting to chase them away, as it might anger the hands. On and on the cawing continued, with the crow desperately trying to warn the stupid writer, who only paused their ridiculous activity to look around at the ferns, mosses, trees and flowers.

After a while the writer ceased what they were doing, stood and, after having urinated on several primroses, walked back in the direction that they had came. They had heard the crow cawing, without being aware of what was being said to them, and instead of fleeing had taken to writing a story about the bird. The crow watched them walking back until they had left the woods and were walking across the fields to the nearby village, surely safe from the revolting hands. That the writer had walked through with care suggested to the crow that, if the hands were waiting to attack humans, they would only do so to those sought to do harm. Maybe this was the case. Maybe not. All things being possible renders it impossible to say with any certainty.

Part 4

If there is anything to be taken from this tale it is that it is now unsafe to visit woods in North Devon with the intent to do harm, as to do so would likely risk the horror of the hands. The writer was never attacked by the hands and was often seen by the crow walking, sitting and, despite the absurdity of it, writing. For the rest of their days, the crow only caught brief glimpses of the hands, who had traveled to woods along the Taw river, across Exmoor and as far south as Dartmoor. A grotesque and revolting presence, lurking in the unseen.

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